RUTH FIELDING AT LIGHTHOUSE POINT

ALICE B. EMERSON

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SHE WAS UNCONSCIOUS WHEN THEY LIFTED HER OUT.

Ruth Fielding at Lighthouse Point

OR

NITA, THE GIRL CASTAWAY

BY

ALICE B. EMERSON

AUTHOR OF "RUTH FIELDING OF THE RED MILL,"
"RUTH FIELDING AT BRIARWOOD HALL" ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

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Books for Girls

By ALICE B. EMERSON

RUTH FIELDING SERIES

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RUTH FIELDING OF THE RED MILL
Or, Jasper Parloe's Secret.

RUTH FIELDING AT BRIARWOOD HALL
Or, Solving the Campus Mystery.

RUTH FIELDING AT SNOW CAMP
Or, Lost in the Backwoods.

RUTH FIELDING AT LIGHTHOUSE POINT
Or, Nita, the Girl Castaway.

RUTH FIELDING AT SILVER RANCH
Or, Schoolgirls Among the Cowboys.

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RUTH FIELDING AT LIGHTHOUSE POINT

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RUTH FIELDING AT LIGHTHOUSE POINT

CHAPTER I

AN INITIATION

A BROWN dusk filled the long room, for although the windows were shrouded thickly and no lamp burned, some small ray of light percolated from without and made dimly visible the outlines of the company there gathered.

The low, quavering notes of an organ sighed through the place. There was the rustle and movement of a crowd. To the neophyte, who had been brought into the hall with eyes bandaged, it all seemed very mysterious and awe-inspiring.

Now she was set in a raised place and felt that before her was the company of masked and shrouded figures, in scarlet dominoes like those worn by the two guards who had brought her from the anteroom. The bandage was whisked from her eyes; but she could see nothing of her surroundings, nor of the company before which she stood.

"Candidate!" spoke a hollow, mysterious voice somewhere in the gloom, yet sounding so

close to her ear that she started. "Candidate! you stand before the membership body of the S. B.'s. You are as yet unknown to them and they unknown to you. If you enter the secret association of the S. B.'s you must throw off and despise forever all ties of a like character. Do you agree?"

The candidate obeyed, in so far as she pro- her sharply in the ribs and a shrill voice whispered: "Say you do—gump!"

The candidate obeyed, in so far as she proclaimed that she did, at least.

"It is an oath," went on the sepulchral voice. "Remember!"

In chorus the assembly immediately repeated, "Remember!" in solemn tones.

"Candidate!" repeated the leading voice, "you have been taught the leading object of our existence as a society. What is it?"

Without hesitation now, the candidate replied: "Helpfulness."

"It is right. And now, what do our initials stand for?"

"Sweetbriar," replied the shaking voice of the candidate.

"True. That is what our initials stand for to the world at large—to those who are not initiated into the mysteries of the S. B.'s. But those letters may stand for many things and it is my privi-

lege to explain to you now that they likewise are to remind us all of two virtues that each Sweetbriar is expected to practice—to be sincere and to befriend. Remember! Sincerity—Befriend. Remember!"

Again the chorus of mysterious voices chanted: "Remember!"

"And now let the light shine upon the face of the candidate, that the Shrouded Sisterhood may know her where'er they meet her. Once! Twice! Thrice! Light!"

At the cry the ray of a spot-light flashed out of the gloom at the far end of the long room and played glaringly upon the face and figure of the candidate. She herself was more blinded by the glare than she had been by the bandage. There was a rustle and movement in the room, and the leading voice went on:

"Sisters! the novice is now revealed to us all. She has now entered into the outer circle of the Sweetbriars. Let her know us, where'er she meets us, by our rallying cry. Once! Twice! Thrice! *Now!*"

Instantly, and in unison, the members chanted the following "yell":

"S. B.—Ah-h-h!
S. B.—Ah-h-h!
Sound our battle-cry

Near and far!
S. B.—All!
Briarwood Hall!
Sweetbriars, do or die—
This be our battle-cry—
Briarwood Hall!
That's All!"

With the final word the spot-light winked out and the other lights of the hall flashed on. The assembly of hooded and shrouded figures were revealed. And Helen Cameron, half smiling and half crying, found herself standing upon the platform before her schoolmates who had already joined the secret fraternity known as "The Sweetbriars."

Beside her, and presiding over the meeting, she found her oldest and dearest friend at Briarwood Hall—Ruth Fielding. A small megaphone stood upon the table at Ruth's hand, and its use had precluded Helen's recognition of her chum's voice as the latter led in the ritual of the fraternity. Like their leader, the other Sweetbriars had thrown back their scarlet hoods, and Helen recognized almost all of the particular friends with whom she had become associated since she had come—with Ruth Fielding—the autumn before to Briarwood Hall.

The turning on of the lights was the signal for

general conversation and great merriment. It was the evening of the last day but one of the school year, and discipline at Briarwood Hall was relaxed to a degree. However, the fraternity of the Sweetbriars had grown in favor with Mrs. Grace Tellingham, the preceptress of the school, and with the teachers, since its inception. Now the fifty or more girls belonging to the society (fully a quarter of the school membership) paired off to march down to the dining hall, where a special collation was spread.

Helen Cameron went down arm-in-arm with the president of the S. B.'s.

"Oh, Ruthie!" the new member exclaimed, "I think it's ever so nice—much better than the initiation of the old Upedes. I can talk about them now," and she laughed, "because they are—as Tommy says—'busted all to flinders.' Haven't held a meeting for more than a month, and the last time—whisper! this is a secret, and I guess the last remaining secret of the Upedes—there were only The Fox and I there!"

"I'm glad you're one of us at last, Helen," said Ruth Fielding, squeezing her chum as they went down the stairs.

"And I ought to have been an original member along with you, Ruth," said Helen, thoughtfully. "The Up and Doing Club hadn't half the attractiveness that your society has——"

"Don't call it *my* society. We don't want any one-girl club. That was the trouble with the Up and Doings—just as 'too much faculty' is the objection to the Forward Club."

"Oh, I de-test the Fussy Curls just as much as ever," declared Helen, quickly, "although Madge Steele *is* president."

"Well, we 'Infants,' as they called us last fall when we entered Briarwood, are in control of the S. B.'s, and we can help each other," said Ruth, with satisfaction.

"But you talk about the Upedes being a one-girl club. I know The Fox was all-in-all in that. But you're pretty near the whole thing in the S. B.'s, Ruthie," and Helen laughed, slily. "Why, they say you wrote all the ritual and planned everything."

"Never mind," said Ruth, calmly; "we can't have a dictator in the S. B.'s without changing the constitution. The same girl can't be president for more than one year."

"But you deserve to boss it all," said her chum, warmly. "And I for one wouldn't mind if you did."

Helen was a very impulsive, enthusiastic girl. When she and Ruth Fielding had come to Briarwood Hall she had immediately taken up with a lively and thoughtless set of girls who had banded themselves into the Up and Doing Club, and whose leader was Mary Cox, called "The Fox,"

because of her shrewdness. Ruth had not cared for this particular society and, in time, she and most of the other new pupils formed the Sweetbriar Club. Helen Cameron, loyal to her first friends at the school, had not fallen away from Mary Cox and joined the Sweetbriars until this very evening, which was, as we have seen, the evening before the final day of the school year.

Ruth Fielding took the head of the table when the girls sat down to supper and the other officers of the club sat beside her. Helen was therefore separated from her, and when the party broke up late in the evening (the curfew bell at nine o'clock was abolished for this one night) the chums started for their room in the West Dormitory at different times. Ruth went with Mercy Curtis, who was lame; outside the dining hall Helen chanced to meet Mary Cox, who had been calling on some party in the East Dormitory building.

"Hello, Cameron!" exclaimed The Fox. "So you've finally been roped in by the 'Soft Babies,' have you? I thought that chum of yours—Fielding—would manage to get you hobbled and tied before vacation."

"You can't say I wasn't loyal to the Upedes as long as there was any society to be loyal to," said Helen, quickly, and with a flush.

"Oh, well; you'll be going down to Heavy's seashore cottage with them now, I suppose?" said The Fox, still watching Helen curiously.

"Why, of course! I intended to before," returned the younger girl. "We all agreed about that last winter when we were at Snow Camp."

"Oh, you did, eh?" laughed the other. "Well, if you hadn't joined the Soft Babies you wouldn't have been 'axed,' when it came time to go. This is going to be an S. B. frolic. Your nice little Ruth Fielding says she won't go if Heavy invites any but her precious Sweetbriars to be of the party."

"I don't believe it, Mary Cox!" cried Helen. "I mean, that *you* must be misinformed. Somebody has maligned Ruth."

"Humph! Maybe, but it doesn't look like it. Who is going to Lighthouse Point?" demanded The Fox, carelessly. "Madge Steele, for although she is president of the Fussy Curls, she is likewise honorary member of the S. B.'s."

"That is so," admitted Helen.

"Heavy, herself," pursued Mary Cox, "Belle and Lluella, who have all backslid from the Upedes, and yourself."

"But you've been invited," said Helen, quickly.

"Not much. I tell you, if you and Belle and Lluella had not joined her S. B.'s you wouldn't have been numbered among Heavy's house party. Don't fool yourself on that score," and with another unpleasant laugh, the older girl walked on and left Helen in a much perturbed state of mind.

CHAPTER II

THE FOX AT WORK

Ruth Fielding, after the death of her parents, when she was quite a young girl, had come from Darrowtown to live with her mother's uncle at the Red Mill, on the Lumano River near Cheslow, as was related in the first volume of this series, entitled, "Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill; Or, Jasper Parloe's Secret." Ruth had found Uncle Jabez very hard to get along with at first, for he was a miser, and his kinder nature seemed to have been crusted over by years of hoarding and selfishness.

But through a happy turn of circumstances Ruth was enabled to get at the heart of her crotchety uncle, and when Ruth's very dear friend, Helen Cameron, planned to go to boarding school, Uncle Jabez was won over to sending Ruth with her. The fun and work of that first half at school are related in the second volume of the series, entitled "Ruth Fielding at Briarwood Hall; Or, Solving the Campus Mystery."

In the third volume of the series, "Ruth Fielding at Snow Camp; Or, Lost in the Backwoods,"

Ruth and some of her school friends spend a part of the mid-winter vacation at Mr. Cameron's hunting lodge in the Big Woods, where they enjoy many winter sports and have adventures galore.

Ruth and Helen occupied a "duo" room on the second floor of the West Dormitory; but when Mercy Curtis, the lame girl, had come to Briarwood in the middle of the first term, the chums had taken her in with them, the occupants of that particular study being known thereafter among the girls of Briarwood as the Triumvirate.

Helen, when deserted by The Fox, who, from that first day at Briarwood Hall, had shown herself to be jealous of Ruth Fielding, for some reason, went slowly up to her room and found Ruth and Mercy there before her. There was likewise a stout, doll-faced, jolly girl with them, known to the other girls as "Heavy," but rightly owning the name of Jennie Stone.

"Here she is now!" cried this latter, on Helen's appearance. "'The candidate will now advance and say her a-b-abs!' You looked scared to death when they shot you with the lime-light. I was chewing a caramel when they initiated me, and I swallowed it whole, and pretty near choked, when the spot-light was turned on."

Mercy, who was a very sharp girl indeed, was looking at Helen slily. She saw that something had occasioned their friend annoyance.

"What's happened to you since we came from the supper, Helen?" she asked.

"Indigestion!" gasped Heavy. "I've some pepsin tablets in my room. Want one, Nell?"

"No. I am all right," declared Helen.

"Well, we were just waiting for you to come in," the stout girl said. "Maybe we'll all be so busy to-morrow that we won't have time to talk about it. So we must plan for the Lighthouse Point campaign now."

"Oh!" said Helen, slowly. "So you can make up your party now?"

"Of course! Why, we really made it up last winter; didn't we?" laughed Heavy.

"But we didn't know whether we could go or not then," Ruth Fielding said.

"You didn't know whether *I* could go, I suppose you mean?" suggested Helen.

"Why—not particularly," responded Ruth, in some wonder at her chum's tone. "I supposed you and Tom would go. Your father so seldom refuses you anything."

"Oh!"

"I didn't know how Uncle Jabez would look at it," pursued Ruth. "But I wrote him a while ago and told him you and Mercy were going to accept Jennie's invite, and he said I could go to Lighthouse Point, too."

"Oh!" said Helen again. "You didn't wait

until I joined the S. B's, then, to decide whether you would accept Heavy's invitation, or not?"

"Of course not!"

"How ridiculous!" cried Heavy.

"Well, it's to be a Sweetbriar frolic; isn't it, Heavy?" asked Helen, calmly.

"No. Madge and Bob Steele are going. And your brother Tom," chuckled the stout girl. "And perhaps that Isadore Phelps. You wouldn't call Busy Izzy a Sweetbriar; would you?"

"I don't mean the boys," returned Helen, with some coolness.

Suddenly Mercy Curtis, her head on one side and her thin little face twisted into a most knowing grimace, interrupted. "I know what this means!" she exclaimed.

"What do *you* mean, Goody Two-Sticks?" demanded Ruth, kindly.

"Our Helen has a grouch."

"Nonsense!" muttered Helen, flushing again.

"I thought something didn't fit her when she came in," said Heavy, calmly. "But I thought it was indigestion."

"What *is* the matter, Helen?" asked Ruth Fielding in wonder.

"'Fee, fi, fo fum! I see the negro run!'—into the woodpile!" ejaculated the lame girl, in her biting way. "I know what is the matter with

Queen Helen of Troy. She's been with The Fox."

Ruth and Heavy stared at Mercy in surprise; but Helen turned her head aside.

"That's the answer!" chuckled the shrewd little creature. "I saw them walk off together after supper. And The Fox has been trying to make trouble—same as usual."

"Mary Cox! Why, that's impossible," said Heavy, good-naturedly. "She wouldn't say anything to make Helen feel bad."

Mercy darted an accusing fore-finger at Helen, and still kept her eyes screwed up. "I dare you to tell! I dare you to tell!" she cried in a sing-song voice.

Helen had to laugh at last.

"Well, Mary Cox said you had decided to have none but Sweetbriars at the cottage on the beach, Heavy."

"Lot she knows about it," grunted the stout girl.

"Why, Heavy asked her to go; didn't she?" cried Ruth.

"Well, that was last Winter. I didn't press her," admitted the stout girl.

"But she's your roommate, like Belle and Lluella," said Ruth, in some heat. "Of course you've got to ask her."

"Don't you do it. She's a spoil-sport," de-

clared Mercy Curtis, in her sharp way. "The Fox will keep us all in hot water."

"Do be still, Mercy!" cried Ruth. "This is Heavy's own affair. And Mary Cox has been her roommate ever since she's been at Briarwood."

"I don't know that Belle and Lluella can go with us," said the stout girl, slowly. "The fright they got up in the woods last Winter scared their mothers. I guess they think I'm too reckless. Sort of wild, you know," and the stout girl's smile broadened.

"But you intended inviting Mary Cox?" demanded Ruth, steadily.

"Yes. I said something about it to her. But she wouldn't give me a decided answer then."

"Ask her again."

"Don't you do it!" exclaimed Mercy, sharply.

"I mean it, Jennie," Ruth said.

"I can't please both of you," said the good-natured stout girl.

"Please me. Mercy doesn't mean what she says. If Mary Cox thinks that I am opposed to your having her at Lighthouse Point, I shall be offended if you do not immediately insist upon her being one of the party."

"And that'll suit The Fox right down to the ground," exclaimed Mercy. "That is what she was fishing for when she got at Helen to-night."

"Did *I* say she said anything about Lighthouse Point?" quickly responded Helen.

"You didn't have to," rejoined Mercy, sharply. "We knew."

"At least," Ruth said to Heavy, quietly, yet with decision, "you will ask your old friend to go?"

"Why—if you don't mind."

"There seems to have been some truth in Mary's supposition, then," Ruth said, sadly. "She thinks I intended to keep her out of a good time. I never thought of such a thing. If Mary Cox does not accept your invitation, Heavy, I shall be greatly disappointed. Indeed, I shall be tempted to decline to go to the shore with you. Now, remember that, Jennie Stone."

"Oh, shucks! you're making too much fuss about it," said the stout girl, rising lazily, and speaking in her usual drawling manner. "Of course I'll have her—if she'll go. Father's bungalow is big enough, goodness knows. And we'll have lots of fun there."

She went her leisurely way to the door. Had she been brisker of movement, when she turned the knob she would have found Mary Cox with her ear at the keyhole, drinking in all that had been said in the room of the triumvirate. But The Fox was as swift of foot as she was shrewd and sly of mind. She was out of sight and hearing when Jennie Stone came out into the corridor,

CHAPTER III

ON LAKE OSAGO

THE final day of the school year was always a gala occasion at Briarwood Hall. Although Ruth Fielding and her chum, Helen Cameron, had finished only their first year, they both had important places in the exercises of graduation. Ruth sang in the special chorus, while Helen played the violin in the school orchestra. Twenty-four girls were in the graduating class. Briarwood Hall prepared for Wellesley, or any of the other female colleges, and when Mrs. Grace Tellingham, the preceptress, graduated a girl with a certificate it meant that the young lady was well grounded in all the branches that Briarwood taught.

The campus was crowded with friends of the graduating class, and of the Seniors in particular. It was a very gay scene, for the June day was perfect and the company were brightly dressed. The girls, however, including the graduating class, were dressed in white only. Mrs. Tellingham had established that custom some years before,

and the different classes were distinguished only by the color of their ribbons.

Helen Cameron's twin brother, Tom, and Madge Steele's brother, Bob, attended the Seven Oaks Military Academy, not many miles from Briarwood. Their graduation exercises and "Breaking Up," as the boys called it, were one day later than the same exercises at Briarwood. So the girls did not start for home until the morning of the latter day.

Old Dolliver, the stage driver, brought his lumbering stage to the end of the Cedar Walk at nine o'clock, to which point Tony Foyle, the man-of-all-work, had wheeled the girls' baggage. Ruth, and Helen, and Mercy Curtis had bidden their room good-bye and then made the round of the teachers before this hour. They gathered here to await the stage with Jennie Stone, Madge and Mary Cox. The latter had agreed to be one of the party at Lighthouse Point and was going home with Heavy to remain during the ensuing week, before the seashore party should be made up.

The seven girls comfortably filled the stage, with their hand luggage, while the trunks and suitcases in the boot and roped upon the roof made the Ark seem top-heavy. There was a crowd of belated pupils, and those who lived in the neighborhood, to see them off, and the coach

finally rolled away to the famous tune of "Uncle Noah, He Built an Ark," wherein Madge Steele put her head out of the window and "lined out" a new verse to the assembled "well-wishers":

"And they didn't know where they were at,
One wide river to cross!
Till the Sweetbriars showed 'em that!
One wide river to cross!
One wide river!
One wide river of Jordan—
One wide river!
One wide river to cross!"

For although Madge Steele was now president of the Forward Club, a much older school fraternity than the Sweetbriars, she was, like Mrs. Tellingham, and Miss Picolet, the French teacher, and others of the faculty, an honorary member of the society started by Ruth Fielding. The Sweetbriars, less than one school year old, was fast becoming the most popular organization at Briarwood Hall.

Mary Cox did not join in the singing, nor did she have a word to say to Ruth during the ride to the Seven Oaks station. Tom and Bob, with lively, inquisitive, harum-scarum Isadore Phelps —"Busy Izzy," as his mates called him—were at the station to meet the party from Briarwood

Hall. Tom was a dark-skinned, handsome lad, while Bob was big, and flaxen-haired, and bashful. Madge, his sister, called him "Sonny" and made believe he was at the pinafore stage of growth instead of being almost six feet tall and big in proportion.

"Here's the dear little fellow!" she cried, jumping lightly out to be hugged by the big fellow. "Let Sister see how he's grown since New Year's. Why, we'd hardly have known our Bobbins; would we, Ruthie? Let me fix your tie—it's under your ear, of course. Now, that's a neat little boy. You can shake hands with Ruthie, and Helen, and Mary, and Jennie, and Mercy Curtis—and help Uncle Noah get off the trunks."

The three boys, being all of the freshman class at Seven Oaks, had less interest in the final exercises of the term at the Academy than the girls had had at Briarwood; therefore the whole party took a train that brought them to the landing at Portageton, on Osago Lake, before noon. From that point the steamer *Lanawaxa* would transport them the length of the lake to another railroad over which the young folks must travel to reach Cheslow.

At this time of year the great lake was a beautiful sight. Several lines of steamers plied upon it; the summer resorts on the many islands which

dotted it, and upon the shores of the mainland, were gay with flags and banners; the sail up the lake promised to be a most delightful one.

And it would have been so—delightful for the whole party—had it not been for a single member. The Fox could not get over her unfriendly feeling, although Ruth Fielding gave her no cause at all. Ruth tried to talk to Mary, at first; but finding the older girl determined to be unpleasant, she let her alone.

On the boat the three boys gathered camp-chairs for the party up forward, and their pocket money went for candy and other goodies with which to treat their sisters and the latter's friends. There were not many people aboard the *Lana-waxa* on this trip and the young folks going home from school had the forward upper deck to themselves. There was a stiff breeze blowing that drove the other passengers into the inclosed cabins.

But the girls and their escorts were in high spirits. As Madge Steele declared, "they had slipped the scholastic collar for ten long weeks."

"And if we can't find a plenty of fun in that time it's our own fault," observed Heavy—having some trouble with her articulation because of the candy in her mouth. "Thanks be to goodness! no rising bell—no curfew—no getting anywhere at any particular time. Oh, I'm just going to lie

in the sand all day, when we get to the Point——"

"And have your meals brought to you, Heavy?" queried Ruth, slily.

"Never you mind about the meals, Miss. Mammy Laura's going down with us to cook, and if there's one thing Mammy Laura loves to do, it's to cook messes for me—and bring them to me. She's always been afraid that my health was delicate and that I needed more nourishing food than the rest of the family. Such custards! Um! um!"

"Do go down and see if there is anything left on the lunch counter, boys," begged Helen, anxiously. "Otherwise we won't get Heavy home alive."

"I *am* a little bit hungry, having had no dinner," admitted the stout girl, reflectively.

The boys went off, laughing. "She's so feeble!" cried Mary Cox, pinching the stout girl. "We never should travel with her alone. There ought to be a trained nurse and a physician along. I'm worried to death about her——"

"Ouch! stop your pinching!" commanded Jennie, and rose up rather suddenly, for her, to give chase to her tormentor.

The Fox was as quick as a cat, and Heavy was lubberly in her movements. The lighter girl, laughing shrilly, ran forward and vaulted over the low rail that separated the awning-covered

upper deck from the unrailed roof of the lower deck forward.

"You'd better come back from there!" Ruth cried, instantly. "It's wet and slippery."

The Fox turned on her instantly, her face flushed and her eyes snapping.

"Mind your business, Miss!" she cried, stamping her foot. "I can look out——"

Her foot slipped. Heavy thoughtlessly laughed. None of them really thought of danger save Ruth. But Mary Cox lost her foothold, slid toward the edge of the sloping deck, and the next instant, as the *Lanawaxa* plunged a little sideways (for the sharp breeze had raised quite a little sea) The Fox shot over the brink of the deck and, with a scream, disappeared feet first into the lake.

It all happened so quickly that nobody but the group of girls on the forward deck had seen the accident. And Madge, Heavy and Helen were all helpless—so frightened that they could only cry out.

"She can't swim!" gasped Helen. "She'll be drowned."

"The paddle-wheel will hit her!" added Madge.

"Oh! where are those useless boys?" demanded the stout girl. "They're never around when they could be of use."

But Ruth said never a word. The emergency appealed to her quite as seriously as it did to her friends. But she knew that if Mary Cox was to be saved they must act at once.

She flung off her cap and light outside coat. She wore only canvas shoes, and easily kicked them off and ran, in her stocking-feet, toward the paddle-box. Onto this she climbed by the short ladder and sprang out upon its top just as The Fox came up after her plunge.

By great good fortune the imperiled girl had been carried beyond the paddles. But the *Lanawaxa* was steaming swiftly past the girl in the water. Ruth knew very well that Mary Cox could not swim. She was one of the few girls at Briarwood who had been unable to learn that accomplishment, under the school instructor, in the gymnasium pool. Whereas Ruth herself had taken to the art "like a duck to water."

Mary's face appeared but for a moment above the surface. Ruth saw it, pale and despairing; then a wave washed over it and the girl disappeared for a second time.

CHAPTER IV

TROUBLE AT THE RED MILL

THE screams of the other girls had brought several of the male passengers as well as some of the boat's crew to the forward deck. Mercy Curtis, who had lain down in a stateroom to rest, drew back the blind and saw Ruth poised on the wheel-box.

"Don't you do that, Ruth Fielding!" cried the lame girl, who knew instinctively what her friend's intention was.

But Ruth paid no more attention to her than she had to the other girls. She was wearing a heavy serge skirt, and she knew it would hamper her in the water. With nimble fingers she unfastened this and dropped it upon the deck. Then, without an instant's hesitation, she sprang far out from the steamer, her body shooting straight down, feet-first, to the water.

Ruth was aware as she shot downward that Tom Cameron was at the rail over her head. The *Lanawaxa* swept by and he, having run astern, leaned over and shouted to her. She had a glimpse of something swinging out from the

rail, too, and dropping after her into the lake, and as the water closed over her head she realized that he had thrown one of the lifebuoys.

But deep as the water was, Ruth had no fear for herself. She loved to swim and the instructor at Briarwood had praised her skill. The only anxiety she had as she sank beneath the surface was for Mary Cox, who had already gone down twice.

She had leaped into the lake near where The Fox had disappeared. Once beneath the surface, Ruth opened her eyes and saw the shadow of some body in the water ahead. Three strokes brought her within reach of it. She seized Mary Cox by the hair, and although her school fellow was still sinking, Ruth, with sturdy strokes, drew her up to the surface.

What a blessing it was to obtain a draught of pure air! But The Fox was unconscious, and Ruth had to bear her weight up, while treading water, until she could dash the drops from her eyes. There was the lifebuoy not ten yards away. She struck out for it with one hand, while towing Mary with the other. Long before the steamer had been stopped and a boat lowered and manned, Ruth and her burden reached the great ring, and the girls were comparatively safe.

Tom Cameron came in the boat, having forced himself in with the crew, and it was he who

hauled Mary Cox over the gunwale, and then aided Ruth into the boat.

"That's the second time you've saved that girl from drowning, Ruth," he gasped. "The first time was last Fall when you and I hauled her out of the hole in the ice on Triton Lake. And now she would have gone down and stayed down if you hadn't dived for her. Now! don't you ever do it again!" concluded the excited lad.

Had Ruth not been so breathless she must have laughed at him; but there really was a serious side to the adventure. Mary Cox did not recover her senses until after they were aboard the steamer. Ruth was taken in hand by a stewardess, undressed and put between blankets, and her clothing dried and made presentable before the steamer docked at the head of the lake.

As Tom Cameron had said, Mary Cox had fallen through the ice early in the previous Winter, and Ruth had aided in rescuing her; The Fox had never even thanked the girl from the Red Mill for such aid. And now Ruth shrank from meeting her and being thanked on this occasion. Ruth had to admit to herself that she looked forward with less pleasure to the visit to the seashore with Heavy because Mary Cox was to be of the party. She could not like The Fox, and she really had ample reason.

The other girls ran into the room where Ruth

was and reported when Mary became conscious, and how the doctor said that she would never have come up to the surface again, she had taken so much water into her lungs, had not Ruth grasped her. They had some difficulty in bringing The Fox to her senses.

"And aren't you the brave one, Ruthie Fielding!" cried Heavy. "Why, Mary Cox owes her life to you—she actually does *this* time. Before, when you and Tom Cameron helped her out of the water, she acted nasty about it——"

"Hush, Jennie!" commanded Ruth. "Don't say another word about it. If I had not jumped into the lake after Mary, somebody else would."

"Pshaw!" cried Heavy, "you can't get out of it that way. And I'm glad it happened. Now we *shall* have a nice time at Lighthouse Point, for Mary can't be anything but fond of you, child!"

Ruth, however, had her doubts. She remained in the stateroom as long as she could after the *Lanawaxa* docked. When she was dressed and came out on the deck the train that took Heavy and The Fox and the Steeles and Busy Izzy home, had gone. The train to Cheslow started a few minutes later.

"Come on, Miss Heroine!" said Tom, grinning at her as she came out on the deck. "You needn't be afraid now. Nobody will thank you.

I didn't hear her say a grateful word myself—and I bet *you* won't, either!"

Helen said nothing at all about The Fox; but she looked grave. The former president of the Upedes had influenced Helen a great deal during this first year at boarding school. Had Ruth Fielding been a less patient and less faithful chum, Helen and she would have drifted apart. And perhaps an occasional sharp speech from Mercy was what had served more particularly to show Helen how she was drifting. Now the lame girl observed:

"The next time you see Mary Cox fall overboard, Ruth, I hope you'll let her swallow the whole pond, and walk ashore without your help."

"If your name *is* 'Mercy' you show none to either your friends or enemies; do you?" returned Ruth, smiling.

The girl from the Red Mill refused to discuss the matter further, and soon had them all talking upon a pleasanter theme. It was evening when they reached Cheslow and Mercy's father, of course, who was the station agent, and Mr. Cameron, were waiting for them.

The big touring car belonging to the dry-goods merchant was waiting for the young folk, and after they had dropped Mercy Curtis at the little cottage on the by-street, the machine traveled swiftly across the railroad and out into the

suburbs of the town. The Red Mill was five miles from the railroad station, while the Camerons' fine home, "Outlook," stood some distance beyond.

Before they had gotten out of town, however, the car was held up in front of a big house set some distance back from the road, and before which, on either side of the arched gateway, was a green lamp. The lamps were already lighted and as the Cameron car came purring along the street, with Helen herself under the steering wheel (for she had begged the privilege of running it home) a tall figure came hurrying out of the gateway, signaling them to stop.

"It's Doctor Davison himself!" cried Ruth, in some excitement.

"And how are all the Sweetbriars?" demanded the good old physician, their staunch friend and confidant. "Ah, Tom, my fine fellow! have they drilled that stoop out of your shoulders?"

"We're all right, Dr. Davison—and awfully glad to see you," cried Ruth, leaning out of the tonneau to shake hands with him.

"Ah! here's the sunshine of the Red Mill—and they're needing sunshine there, just now, I believe," said the doctor. "Did you bring my Goody Two-Sticks home all right?"

"She's all right, Doctor," Helen assured him. "And so are we—only Ruth's been in the lake."

"In Lake Osago?"

"Yes, sir—and it was wet," Tom told him, grinning.

"I suppose she was trying to find that out," returned Dr. Davison. "Did you get anything else out of it, Ruthie Fielding?"

"A girl," replied Ruth, rather tartly.

"Oh-ho! Well, *that* was something," began the doctor, when Ruth stopped him with an abrupt question:

"Why do you say that they need me at home, sir?"

"Why—honey—they're always glad to have you there, I reckon," said the doctor, slowly. "Uncle Jabez and Aunt Alviry will both be glad to see you——"

"There's trouble, sir; what is it?" asked Ruth, gravely, leaning out of the car so as to speak into his ear. "There *is* trouble; isn't there? What is it?"

"I don't know that I can exactly tell you, Ruthie," he replied, with gravity. "But it's there. You'll see it."

"Aunt Alviry——"

"Is all right."

"Then it's Uncle Jabez?"

"Yes, my child. It is Uncle Jabez. What it is you will have to find out, I am afraid, for *I* have not been able to," said the doctor, in a whis-

per. "Maybe it is given to you, my dear, to straighten out the tangles at the Red Mill."

He invited them all down to sample Old Mammy's cakes and lemonade the first pleasant afternoon, and then the car sped on. But Ruth was silent. What she might find at the Red Mill troubled her.

CHAPTER V

THE TINTACKER MINE

It was too late to more than see the outlines of the mill and connecting buildings as the car rushed down the hill toward the river road, between which and the river itself, and standing on a knoll, the Red Mill was. Ruth could imagine just how it looked—all in dull red paint and clean white trimmings. Miserly as Jabez Potter was about many things, he always kept his property in excellent shape, and the mill and farmhouse, with the adjoining outbuildings, were painted every Spring.

A lamp burned in the kitchen; but all else was dark about the place.

"Don't look very lively, Ruth," said Tom. "I don't believe they expect you."

But even as he spoke the door opened, and a broad beam of yellow lamplight shot out across the porch and down the path. A little, bent figure was silhouetted in the glow.

"There's Aunt Alviry!" cried Ruth, in delight. "I know *she's* all right."

"All excepting her back and her bones," whis-

pered Helen. "Now, Ruthie! don't you let anything happen to veto our trip to Heavy's seaside cottage."

"Oh! don't suggest such a thing!" cried her brother.

But Ruth ran up the path after bidding them good-night, with her heart fast beating. Dr. Davison's warning had prepared her for almost any untoward happening.

But Aunt Alvirah only looked delighted to see the girl as Ruth ran into her arms. Aunt Alvirah was a friendless old woman whose latter years would have been spent at the Cheslow Almshouse had not Jabez Potter taken her to keep house for him more than ten years before. Ill-natured people said that the miller had done this to save paying a housekeeper; but in Aunt Alvirah's opinion it was an instance of Mr. Potter's kindness of heart.

"You pretty creetur!" cried Aunt Alvirah, hugging Ruth close to her. "And how you've growed! What a smart girl you are getting to be! Deary, deary me! how I have longed for you to git back, Ruthie. Come in! Come in! Oh, my back and oh, my bones!" she complained, under her breath, as she hobbled into the house.

"How's the rheumatics, Aunty?" asked Ruth.

"Just the same, deary. Up one day, and down the next. Allus will be so, I reckon. I'd be too

proud to live if I didn't have my aches and pains —Oh, my back and oh, my bones!" as she lowered herself into her rocker.

"Where's Uncle Jabez?" cried Ruth.

"Sh!" admonished Aunt Alvirah. "Don't holler, child. You'll disturb him."

"Not *sick?*" whispered Ruth, in amazement.

"No—o. Not sick o' body, I reckon, child," returned Aunt Alvirah.

"What *is* it, Aunt Alviry? What's the matter with him?" pursued the girl, anxiously.

"He's sick o' soul, I reckon," whispered the old woman. "Sumpin's gone wrong with him. You know how Jabez is. It's money matters."

"Oh, has he been robbed again?" cried Ruth.

"Sh! not jest like that. Not like what Jasper Parloe did to him. But it's jest as bad for Jabez, I reckon. Anyway, he takes it jest as hard as he did when his cash-box was lost that time. But you know how close-mouthed he is, Ruthie. He won't talk about it."

"About *what?*" demanded Ruth, earnestly.

Aunt Alvirah rose with difficulty from her chair and, with her usual murmured complaint of "Oh, my back and oh, my bones!" went to the door which led to the passage. Off this passage Uncle Jabez's room opened. She closed the door and hobbled back to her chair, but halted before sitting down.

"I never thought to ask ye, deary," she said. "Ye must be very hungry. Ye ain't had no supper."

"You sit right down there and keep still," said Ruth, smiling as she removed her coat. "I guess I can find something to eat."

"Well, there's cocoa. You make you a warm drink. There's plenty of pie and cake—and there's eggs and ham if you want them."

"Don't you fret about me," repeated Ruth.

"What makes you so mussed up?" demanded Aunt Alvirah, the next moment. "Why, Ruth Fielding! have you been in the water?"

"Yes, ma'am. But you know water doesn't hurt me."

"Dear child! how reckless you are! Did you fall in the lake?"

"No, Aunty. I jumped in," returned the girl, and then told her briefly about her adventure on the *Lanawaxa*.

"Goodness me! Goodness me!" exclaimed Aunt Alvirah. "Whatever would your uncle say if he knew about it?"

"And what is the matter with Uncle Jabez?" demanded Ruth, sitting down at the end of the table to eat her "bite." "You haven't told me that."

"I 'lowed to do so," sighed the old woman. "But I don't want him to hear us a-gossipin'

about it. You know how Jabez is. I dunno as he knows *I* know what I know——"

"That sounds just like a riddle, Aunt Alvirah!" laughed Ruth.

"And I reckon it *is* a riddle," she said. "I only know from piecin' this, that, and t'other together; but I reckon I fin'ly got it pretty straight about the Tintacker Mine—and your uncle's lost a power o' money by it, Ruthie."

"What's the Tintacker Mine?" demanded Ruth, in wonder.

"It's a silver mine. I dunno where it is, 'ceptin' it's fur out West and that your uncle put a lot of money into it and he can't git it out."

"Why not?"

"'Cause it's busted, I reckon."

"The mine's 'busted'?" repeated the puzzled Ruth.

"Yes. Or so I s'pect. I'll tell ye how it come about. The feller come along here not long after you went to school last Fall, Ruthie."

"What fellow?" asked Ruth, trying to get at the meat in the nut, for Aunt Alvirah was very discursive.

"Now, you lemme tell it my own way, Ruthie," admonished the old woman. "You would better," and the girl laughed, and nodded. "It was one day when I was sweepin' the sittin' room—ye know, what Mercy Curtis had for her

bedroom while she was out here last Summer."

Ruth nodded again encouragingly, and the little old woman went on in her usual rambling way:

"I was a-sweepin', as I say, and Jabez come by and put his head in at the winder. 'That's too hard for ye, Alviry,' says he. 'Let the dust be—it ain't eatin' nothin'.' Jest like a man, ye know!

"'Well,' says I, 'if I didn't sweep onc't in a while, Jabez, we'd be wadin' to our boot-tops in dirt.' Like that, ye know, Ruthie. And he says, 'They hev things nowadays for suckin' up the dirt, instead of kickin' it up that-a-way,' and with that a voice says right in the yard, 'You're right there, Mister. An' I got one of 'em here to sell ye.'

"There was a young feller in the yard with a funny lookin' rig-a-ma-jig in his hand, and his hat on the back of his head, and lookin' jest as busy as a toad that's swallered a hornet. My! you wouldn't think that feller had a minnit ter stay, the way he acted. Scurcely had time to sell Jabez one of them 'Vac-o-jacs,' as he called 'em."

"A vacuum cleaner!" exclaimed Ruth.

"That's something like it. Only it was like a carpet-sweeper, too. I seen pitchers of 'em in the back of a magazine onc't. I never b'lieved they was for more'n ornament; but that spry young

feller come in and worked it for me, and he sucked up the dust out o' that ingrain carpet till ye couldn't beat a particle out o' it with an ox-goad!

"But I didn't seem ter favor that Vac-o-jac none," continued Aunt Alvirah. "Ye know how close-grained yer Uncle is. I don't expect him ter buy no fancy fixin's for an ol' creetur like me. But at noon time he come in and set one o' the machines in the corner."

"He bought it!" cried Ruth.

"That's what he done. He says, 'Alviry, ef it's any good to ye, there it is! I calkerlate that's a smart young man. He got five dollars out o' me easier than *I* ever got five dollars out of a man in all my days.'

"I tell ye truthful, Ruthie! I can't use it by myself. It works too hard for anybody that's got my back and bones. But Ben, he comes in once in a while and works it for me. I reckon your uncle sends him."

"But, Aunt Alviry!" cried Ruth. "What about the Tintacker Mine? You haven't told me a thing about *that*."

"But I'm a-comin' to it," declared the old woman. "It's all of a piece—that and the Vac-o-jac. I seen the same young feller that sold Jabez the sweeper hangin' about the mill a good bit. And nights Jabez figgered up his accounts and counted his money till 'way long past mid-

night sometimes. Bimeby he says to me, one day:

"'Alviry, that Vac-o-jac works all right; don't it?'

"I didn't want to tell him it was hard to work, and it does take up the dirt, so I says 'Yes.'

"'Then I reckon I'll give the boy the benefit of the doubt, and say he's honest,' says Jabez.

"I didn't know what he meant, and I didn't ask. 'Twouldn't be *my* place ter ask Jabez Potter his business—you know that, Ruthie. So I jest watched and in a day or two back come the young sweeper feller again, and we had him to dinner. This was long before Thanksgivin'. They sat at the table after dinner and I heard 'em talking about the mine."

"Ah-ha!" exclaimed Ruth, with a smile. "Now we come to the mine, do we?"

"I told you it was all of a piece," said Aunt Alvirah, complacently. "Well, it seemed that the boy's father—this agent warn't more than a boy, but maybe he was a sharper, jest the same—the boy's father and another man found the mine. Prospected for it, did they say?"

"That is probably the word," agreed Ruth, much interested.

"Well, anyhow, they found it and got out some silver. Then the boy's father bought out the other man. Then he stopped finding silver in

it. And then he died, and left the mine to his folks. But the boy went out there and rummaged around the mine and found that there was still plenty of silver, only it had to be treated—or put through something—a pro—a prospect——"

"Process?" suggested Ruth.

"That's it, deary. Some process to refine the silver, or git it out of the ore, or something. It was all about chemicals and machinery, and all that. Your Uncle Jabez seemed to understand it, but it was all Dutch to me," declared Aunt Alvirah.

"Well, what happened?"

"Why," continued the old woman, "the Tintacker Mine, as the feller called it, couldn't be made to pay without machinery being bought, and all that. He had to take in a partner, he said. And I jedge your Uncle Jabez bought into the mine. Now, for all I kin hear, there ain't no mine, or no silver, or no nothin'. Leastwise, the young feller can't be heard from, and Jabez has lost his money—and a big sum it is, Ruthie. It's hurt him so that he's got smaller and smaller than ever. Begrudges the very vittles we have on the table, I believe. I'm afraid, deary, that unless there's a change he won't want you to keep on at that school you're going to, it's so expensive," and Aunt Alvirah gathered the startled girl into her arms and rocked her to and fro on her bosom.

"That's what I was comin' to, deary," she sobbed. "I had ter tell ye; he told me I must. Ye can't go back to Briarwood, Ruthie, when it comes Fall.

CHAPTER VI

UNCLE JABEZ AT HIS WORST

It was true that Mr. Potter had promised Ruth only one year at school. The miller considered he owed his grand-niece something for finding and restoring to him his cash-box which he had lost, and which contained considerable money and the stocks and bonds in which he had invested. Jabez Potter prided himself on being strictly honest. He was just according to his own notion. He owed Ruth something for what she had done—something more than her "board and keep"—and he had paid the debt. Or, so he considered.

There had been a time when Uncle Jabez seemed to be less miserly. His hard old heart had warmed toward his niece—or, so Ruth believed. And he had taken a deep interest—for him—in Mercy Curtis, the lame girl. Ruth knew that Uncle Jabez and Dr. Davison together had made it possible for Mercy to attend Briarwood Hall. Of course, Uncle Jabez would cut off that charity as well, and the few tears Ruth cried that night after she went to bed were as much for Mercy's disappointment as for her own.

"But maybe Dr. Davison will assume the entire cost of keeping Mercy at school," thought the girl of the Red Mill. "Or, perhaps, Mr. Curtis may have paid the debts he contracted while Mercy was so ill, and will be able to help pay her expenses at Briarwood."

But about herself she could have no such hope. She knew that the cost of her schooling had been considerable. Nor had Uncle Jabez been niggardly with her about expenditures. He had given her a ten-dollar bill for spending money at the beginning of each half; and twice during the school year had sent her an extra five-dollar bill. Her board and tuition for the year had cost over three hundred dollars; it would cost more the coming year. If Uncle Jabez had actually lost money in this Tintacker Mine Ruth could be sure that he meant what he had left to Aunt Alvirah to tell her. He would not pay for another school year.

But Ruth was a persevering little body and she came of determined folk. She had continued at the district school when the circumstances were much against her. Now, having had a taste of Briarwood for one year, she was the more anxious to keep on for three years more. Besides, there was the vision of college beyond! She knew that if she remained at home, all she could look forward to was to take Aunt Alvirah's place as her uncle's housekeeper. She would have no chance

to get ahead in life. Life at the Red Mill seemed a very narrow outlook indeed.

Ruth meant to get an education. Somehow (there were ten long weeks of Summer vacation before her) she must think up a scheme for earning the money necessary to pay for her second year's tuition. Three hundred and fifty dollars! that was a great, great sum for a girl of Ruth Fielding's years to attempt to earn. How should she "begin to go about it"? It looked an impossible task.

But Ruth possessed a fund of good sense. She was practical, if imaginative, and she was just religious enough to keep her temper sweet. Lying awake and worrying over it wasn't going to do her a bit of good, she knew that. Therefore she did not indulge herself long, but wiped away her tears, snuggled down into the pillow, and dropped asleep.

In the morning she saw Uncle Jabez when she came down stairs. The stove smoked and he was growling about it.

"Good morning, Uncle!" she cried and ran to him and threw her arms around his neck and kissed him—whether he would be kissed, or not!

"There! there! so you're home; are you?" he growled.

Ruth was glad to notice that he called it her home. She knew that he did not want a word to

be said about what Aunt Alvirah had told her over night, and she set about smoothing matters over in her usual way.

"You go on and 'tend to your outside chores, Uncle," she commanded. "I'll build this fire in a jiffy."

"Huh! I reckon you've forgotten how to build a kitchen fire—livin' so long in a steam-heated room," he grunted.

"Now, don't you believe that!" she assured him, and running out to the shed for a handful of fat-pine, or "lightwood," soon had the stove roaring comfortably.

"What a comfort you be, my pretty creetur," sighed Aunt Alvirah, as she hobbled down stairs. "Oh, my back and oh, my bones! This is going to be a *creaky* day. I feel the dampness."

"Don't you believe it, Aunty!" cried the girl. "The sun's going to come out and drive away every atom of this mist. Cheer up!"

And she was that way all day; but deep down in her heart there was a very tender spot indeed, and in her mind the thought of giving up Briarwood rankled like a barbed arrow. She would *not* give it up if she could help. But how ever could she earn three hundred and fifty dollars? The idea seemed preposterous.

Aside from being with Aunt Alvirah, and helping her, Ruth's homecoming was not at all as she

had hoped it would be. Uncle Jabez was more taciturn than ever, it seemed to the girl. She could not break through the crust of his manner. If she followed him to the mill, he was too busy to talk, or the grinding-stones made so much noise that talking was impossible. At night he did not even remain in the kitchen to count up the day's gains and to study his accounts. Instead, he retired with the cash-box and ledger to his own room.

She found no opportunity of opening any discussion about Briarwood, or about the mysterious Tintacker Mine, upon which subject Aunt Alvirah had been so voluble. If the old man had lost money in the scheme, he was determined to give her no information at first hand about it.

At first she was doubtful whether she should go to Lighthouse Point. Indeed, she was not sure that she *could* go. She had no money. But before the week was out at dinner one day Uncle Jabez pushed a twenty-dollar bill across the table to her, and said:

"I said ye should go down there to the seaside for a spell, Ruth. Make that money do ye," and before she could either thank him or refuse the money, Uncle Jabez stumped out of the house.

In the afternoon Helen drove over in the pony carriage to take Ruth to town, so the latter could assure her chum that she would go to Lighthouse Point and be one of Jennie Stone's bungalow

party. They called on Dr. Davison and the girl from the Red Mill managed to get a word in private with the first friend she had made on her arrival at Cheslow (barring Tom Cameron's mastiff, Reno) and told him of conditions as she had found them at home.

"So, it looks as though I had got to make my own way through school, Doctor, and it troubles me a whole lot," Ruth said to the grave physician. "But what bothers me, too, is Mercy——"

"Don't worry about Goody Two-Sticks," returned the doctor, quickly. "Your uncle served notice on me a week before you came home that he could not help to put her through Briarwood beyond this term that is closed. I told him he needn't bother. Sam Curtis is in better shape than he was, and we'll manage to find the money to put that sharp little girl of his where she can get all the education she can possibly soak in. But you, Ruth——"

"I'm going to find a way, too," declared Ruth, independently, yet secretly feeling much less confidence than she appeared to have.

Mercy was all ready for the seaside party when the girls called at the Curtis cottage. The lame girl was in her summer house, sewing and singing softly to herself. She no longer glared at the children as they ran by, or shook her fist at them as she used to, because they could dance and she could not.

On Monday they would start for the shore, meeting Heavy and the others on the train, and spending a good part of the day riding to Lighthouse Point. Mr. Cameron had exercised his influence with certain railroad officials and obtained a private car for the young folk. The Cameron twins and Ruth and Mercy would get aboard the car at Cheslow, and Jennie Stone and her other guests would join them at Jennie's home town.

Between that day and the time of her departure Ruth tried to get closer to Uncle Jabez; but the miller went about with lowering brow and scarcely spoke to either Ruth or Aunt Alvirah.

"It's jest as well ye air goin' away again so quick, my pretty," said the old woman, sadly. "When Jabez gits one o' these moods on him there ain't nobody understands him so well as me. I don't mind if he don't speak. I talk right out loud what I have to say an' he can hear an' reply, or hear an' keep dumb, jest whichever he likes. They say 'hard words don't break no bones' an' sure enough bein' as dumb as an oyster ain't hurtin' none, either. You go 'long an' have your fun with your mates, Ruthie. Mebbe Jabez will be over his grouch when you come back."

But Ruth was afraid that the miller would change but little unless there was first an emphatic betterment in the affairs of the Tintacker Mine.

CHAPTER VII

THE SIGNAL GUN

THE train did not slow down for Sandtown until after mid-afternoon, and when the party of young folk alighted from the private car there were still five miles of heavy roads between them and Lighthouse Point. It had been pleasant enough when Ruth Fielding and her companions left Cheslow, far up in New York State; but now to the south and east the heavens were masked by heavy, lead-colored clouds, and the wind came from the sea in wild, rain-burdened gusts.

"My! how sharp it is!" cried Ruth. "And it's salt!"

"The salt's in the air—especially when there is a storm at sea," explained Heavy. "And I guess we've landed just in time to see a gale. I hope it won't last long and spoil our good time."

"Oh, but to see the ocean in a storm—that will be great!" cried Madge Steele.

The Stones' house had been open for some days and there were two wagons in readiness for the party. The three boys and the baggage went in one, while the five girls crowded into the other

and both wagons were driven promptly toward the shore.

The girls were just as eager as they could be, and chattered like magpies. All but Mary Cox. She had been much unlike her usual self all day. When she had joined the party in the private car that morning, Ruth noticed that The Fox looked unhappy. Her eyes were swollen as though she had been weeping and she had very little to say.

For one thing Ruth was really thankful. The Fox said nothing to her about the accident on the *Lanawaxa.* She may have been grateful for Ruth's timely assistance when she fell into Lake Osago; but she succeeded in effectually hiding her gratitude.

Heavy, however, confided to Ruth that Mary had found sore trouble at home when she returned from Briarwood. Her father had died the year before and left his business affairs in a tangle. Mary's older brother, John, had left college and set about straightening out matters. And now something serious had happened to John. He had gone away on business and for weeks his mother had heard nothing from him.

"I didn't know but Mary would give up coming with us—just as Lluella and Belle did," said the stout girl. "But there is nothing she can do at home, and I urged her to come. We must all try to make it particularly pleasant for her."

Ruth was perfectly willing to do her share; but one can scarcely make it pleasant for a person who refuses to speak to one. And the girl from the Red Mill could not help feeling that The Fox had done her best to make *her* withdraw from Jennie Stone's party.

The sea was not in sight until the wagons had been driven more than half the distance to the Stone bungalow. Then, suddenly rounding a sandy hill, they saw the wide sweep of the ocean in the distance, and the small and quieter harbor on the inviting shore of which the bungalow was built.

Out upon the far point of this nearer sandy ridge was built the white shaft of the Sokennet Light. Sokennet village lay upon the other side of the harbor. On this side a few summer homes had been erected, and beyond the lighthouse was a low, wind-swept building which Heavy told the girls was the life saving station.

"We'll have lots of fun down there. Cap'n Abinadab Cope is just the nicest old man you ever saw!" declared Heavy. "And he can tell the most thrilling stories of wrecks along the coast. And there's the station 'day book' that records everything they do, from the number of pounds of coal and gallons of kerosene used each day, to how they save whole shiploads of people——"

"Let's ask him to save a shipload for our especial benefit," laughed Madge. "I suppose there's only one wreck in fifteen or twenty years, hereabout."

"Nothing of the kind! Sometimes there are a dozen in one winter. And lots of times the surfmen go off in a boat and save ships from being wrecked. In a fog, you know. Ships get lost in a fog sometimes, just as folks get lost in a forest——"

"Or in a blizzard," cried Helen, with a lively remembrance of their last winter's experience at Snow Camp.

"Nothing like that will happen here, you know," said Ruth, laughing. "Heavy promised that we shouldn't be lost in a snowstorm at Lighthouse Point."

"But hear the sea roar!" murmured Mary Cox. "Oh! look at the waves!"

They had now come to where they could see the surf breaking over a ledge, or reef, off the shore some half-mile. The breakers piled up as high—seemingly—as a tall house; and when they burst upon the rock they completely hid it for the time.

"Did you ever see such a sight!" cried Madge. "'The sea in its might'!"

The gusts of rain came more plentifully as they rode on, and so rough did the wind become, the

girls were rather glad when the wagons drove in at the gateway of the Stone place.

Immediately around the house the owner had coaxed some grass to grow—at an expense, so Jennie said, of about "a dollar a blade." But everywhere else was the sand—cream-colored, yellow, gray and drab, or slate where the water washed over it and left it glistening.

The entrance was at the rear; the bungalow faced the cove, standing on a ridge which—as has been before said—continued far out to the lighthouse.

"And a woman keeps the light. Her husband kept it for many, many years; but he died a year ago and the government has continued her as keeper. She's a nice old lady, is Mother Purling, and she can tell stories, too, that will make your hair curl!"

"I'm going over there right away," declared Mary, who had begun to be her old self again. "Mine is as straight as an Indian's."

"A woman alone in a lighthouse! isn't that great?" cried Helen.

"She is alone sometimes; but there is an assistant keeper. His name is Crab—and that's what he is!" declared Heavy.

"Oh, I can see right now that we're going to have great fun here," observed Madge.

This final conversation was carried on after

the girls had run into the house for shelter from a sharp gust of rain, and had been taken upstairs by their hostess to the two big rooms in the front of the bungalow which they were to sleep in. From the windows they could see across the cove to the village and note all the fishing and pleasure boats bobbing at their moorings.

Right below them was a long dock built out from Mr. Stone's property, and behind it was moored a motor-launch, a catboat, and two row-boats—quite a little fleet.

"You see, there isn't a sail in the harbor—nor outside. That shows that the storm now blowing up is bound to be a stiff one," explained Heavy. "For the fishermen of Sokennet are as daring as any on the coast, and I have often seen them run out to the banks into what looked to be the very teeth of a gale!"

Meanwhile, the boys had been shown to a good-sized room at the back of the house, and they were already down again and outside, breasting the intermittent squalls from the sea. They had no curls and furbelows to arrange, and ran all about the place before dinner time.

But ere that time arrived the night had shut down. The storm clouds hung low and threatened a heavy rainfall at any moment. Off on the horizon was a livid streak which seemed to divide the heavy ocean from the wind-thrashed clouds.

The company that gathered about the dinner table was a lively one, even if the wind did shriek outside and the thunder of the surf kept up a continual accompaniment to their conversation—like the deeper notes of a mighty organ. Mr. Stone, himself, was not present; but one of Heavy's young aunts had come down to oversee the party, and she was no wet blanket upon the fun.

Of course, the "goodies" on the table were many. Trust Heavy for that. The old black cook, who had been in the Stone family for a generation, doted on the stout girl and would cook all day to please her young mistress.

They had come to the dessert course when suddenly Tom Cameron half started from his chair and held up a hand for silence.

"What's the matter, Tommy?" demanded Busy Izzy, inquisitively. "What do you hear?"

"Listen!" commanded Tom.

The hilarity ceased suddenly, and all those at the table listened intently. The sudden hush made the noise of the elements seem greater.

"What did you hear?" finally asked his sister.

"A gun—there!"

A distant, reverberating sound was repeated. They all heard it. Heavy and her aunt, Miss Kate, glanced at each other with sudden comprehension.

"What is it?" Ruth cried.

"It's a signal gun," Heavy said, rather weakly.

"A ship in distress,," explained Miss Kate, and her tone hushed their clamor.

A third time the report sounded. The dining room door opened and the butler entered.

"What is it, Maxwell?" asked Miss Kate.

"A ship on the Second Reef, Miss," he said hurriedly. "She was sighted just before dark, driving in. But it was plain that she was helpless, and had gone broadside on to the rock. She'll break up before morning, the fishermen say. It will be an awful wreck, ma'am, for there is no chance of the sea going down."

CHAPTER VIII

THE LIFEBOAT IS LAUNCHED

THE announcement quelled all the jollity of the party on the instant. Heavy even lost interest in the sweetmeats before her.

"Goodness me! what a terrible thing," cried Helen Cameron. "A ship on the rocks!"

"Let's go see it!" Busy Izzy cried.

"If we can," said Tom. "Is it possible, Miss Kate?"

Heavy's aunt looked at the butler for information. He was one of those well-trained servants who make it their business to know everything.

"I can have the ponies put into the long buckboard. The young ladies can drive to the station; the young gentlemen can walk. It is not raining very hard at present."

Mercy elected to remain in the house with Miss Kate. The other girls were just as anxious to go to the beach as the boys. There were no timid ones in the party.

But when they came down, dressed in rainy-weather garments, and saw the man standing at the ponies' heads, glistening in wet rubber, if one

had withdrawn probably all would have given up the venture. The boys had already gone on ahead, and the ship's gun sounded mournfully through the wild night, at short intervals.

They piled into the three seats of the buckboard, Ruth sitting beside the driver. The ponies dashed away along the sandy road. It was two miles to the life saving station. They passed the three boys when they were only half way to their destination.

"Tell 'em not to save all the people from the wreck till we get there!" shouted Tom Cameron.

None of the visitors to Lighthouse Point realized the seriousness of the happening as yet. They were yet to see for the first time a good ship battering her life out against the cruel rocks.

Nor did the girls see the wreck at first, for a pall of darkness lay upon the sea. There were lights in the station and a huge fire of driftwood burned on the beach. Around this they saw figures moving, and Heavy said, as she alighted:

"We'll go right down there. There are some women and children already—see? Sam will put the horses under the shed here."

The five girls locked arms and ran around the station. When they came to the front of the building, a great door was wheeled back at one side and men in oilskins were seen moving about a boat in the shed. The lifeboat was on a truck

and they were just getting ready to haul her down to the beach.

"And the wreck must have struck nearly an hour ago!" cried Madge. "How slow they are."

"No," said Heavy thoughtfully. "It is July now, and Uncle Sam doesn't believe there will be any wrecks along this coast until September. In the summer Cap'n Abinadab keeps the station alone. It took some time to-night to find a crew —and possibly some of these men are volunteers."

But now that the life savers had got on the ground, they went to work with a briskness and skill that impressed the onlookers. They tailed onto the drag rope and hauled the long, glistening white boat down to the very edge of the sea. The wind was directly onshore, and it was a fight to stand against it, let alone to haul such a heavy truck through the wet sand.

Suddenly there was a glow at sea and the gun boomed out again. Then a pale signal light burned on the deck of the foundered vessel. As the light grew those ashore could see her lower rigging and the broken masts and spars. She lay over toward the shore and her deck seemed a snarl of lumber. Between the reef and the beach, too, the water was a-foul with wreckage and planks of all sizes.

"Lumber-laden, boys—and her deck load's broke loose!" shouted one man.

The surf roared in upon the sands, and then sucked out again with a whine which made Ruth shudder. The sea seemed like some huge, ravening beast eager for its prey.

"How can they ever launch the boat into those waves?" Ruth asked of Heavy.

"Oh, they know how," returned the stout girl.

But the life savers were in conference about their captain. He was a short, sturdy old man, with a squarely trimmed "paint-brush" beard. The girls drew nearer to the group and heard one of the surfmen say:

"We'll smash her, Cap, sure as you're born! Those planks are charging in like battering-rams."

"We'll try it, Mason," returned Cap'n Abinadab. "I don't believe we can shoot a line to her against this gale. Ready!"

The captain got in at the stern and the others took their places in the boat. Each man had a cork belt strapped around his body under his arms. There were a dozen other men to launch the lifeboat into the surf when the captain gave the word.

He stood up and watched the breakers rolling in. As a huge one curved over and broke in a smother of foam and spray he shouted some com-

mand which the helpers understood. The boat started, truck and all, and immediately the men launching her were waist deep in the surging, hissing sea.

The returning billow carried the boat off the truck, and the lifeboatmen plunged in their oars and pulled. Their short sharp strokes were in such unison that the men seemed moved by the same mind. The long boat shot away from the beach and mounted the incoming wave like a cork.

The men ashore drew back the boat-truck out of the way. The lifeboat seemed to hang on that wave as though hesitating to take the plunge. Ruth thought that it would be cast back—a wreck itself—upon the beach.

But suddenly it again sprang forward, and the curling surf hid boat and men for a full minute from the gaze of those on shore. The girls clung together and gazed eagerly out into the shifting shadows that overspread the riotous sea.

"They've sunk!" gasped Helen.

"No, no!" cried Heavy. "There! see them?"

The boat's bow rose to meet the next wave. They saw the men pulling as steadily as though the sea were smooth. Old Cap'n Abinadab still stood upright in the stern, grasping the heavy steering oar.

"I've read," said Ruth, more quietly, "that these lifeboats are unsinkable—unless they are completely wrecked. Water-tight compartments, you know."

"That's right, Miss," said one of the men nearby. "She can't sink. But she can be smashed—Ah!"

A shout came back to them from the sea. The wind whipped the cry past them in a most eyrie fashion.

"Cap'n Abinadab shouting to the men," explained Heavy, breathlessly.

Suddenly another signal light was touched off upon the wreck. The growing light flickered over the entire expanse of lumber-littered sea between the reef and the beach. They could see the lifeboat more clearly.

She rose and sank, rose and sank, upon wave after wave, all the time fighting her way out from the shore. Again and again they heard the awesome cry. The captain was warning his men how to pull to escape the charging timbers.

The next breaker that rolled in brought with it several great planks that were dashed upon the beach with fearful force. The splinters flew into the air, the wind whipping them across the sands. The anxious spectators had to dodge.

The timbers ground together as the sea sucked them back. Again and again they were rolled

in the surf, splintering against each other savagely.

"One of those would go through that boat like she was made of paper!" bawled one of the fishermen.

At that moment they saw the lifeboat lifted upon another huge wave. She was a full cable's length from the shore, advancing very slowly. In the glare of the Coston light the anxious spectators saw her swerve to port to escape a huge timber which charged upon her.

The girls screamed. The great stick struck the lifeboat a glancing blow. In an instant she swung broadside to the waves, and then rolled over and over in the trough of the sea.

A chorus of shouts and groans went up from the crowd on shore. The lifeboat and her courageous crew had disappeared.

CHAPTER IX

THE GIRL IN THE RIGGING

"Oh! isn't it awful!" cried Helen, clinging to Ruth Fielding. "I wish I hadn't come."

"They're lost!" quavered Mary Cox. "They're drowned!"

But Heavy was more practical. "They can't drown so easily—with those cork-vests on 'em. There! the boat's righted."

It was a fact. Much nearer the shore, it was true, but the lifeboat was again right side up. They saw the men creep in over her sides and seize the oars which had been made fast to her so that they could not be lost.

But the lifeboat was not so buoyant, and it was plain that she had been seriously injured. Cap'n Abinadab dared not go on to the wreck.

"That timber mashed her in for'ard," declared a fisherman standing near the girls. "They've got to give it up this time."

"Can't steer in such a clutter of wreckage," declared another. "Not with an oared boat. She ought to be a motor. Every other station on this coast, from Macklin to Cape Brender,

has a lifeboat driven by a motor. Sokennet allus has to take other folks' leavin's."

Helplessly the lifeboat drifted shoreward. The girls watched her, almost holding their breath with excitement. The three boys raced down to the beach now and joined them.

"Crickey!" yelped little Isadore Phelps. "We're almost too late to see the fun!"

"Hush!" commanded Ruth, sharply.

"Your idea of fun, young man, is very much warped," Madge Steele added.

"Haven't they got the wrecked people off?" demanded Tom, in wonder.

At the moment an added Coston burned up on the wreck. Its uncertain glare revealed the shrouds and torn lower rigging. They saw several figures—outlined in the glaring light—lashed to the stays and broken spars. The craft was a schooner, lumber-laden, and the sea had now cast her so far over on her beam-ends that her deck was like a wall confronting the shore. Against this background the crew were visible, clinging desperately to hand-holds, or lashed to the rigging.

And a great cry went suddenly up from the crowd ashore. "There's women aboard her—poor lost souls!" quavered one old dame who had seen many a terrifying wreck along the coast.

Ruth Fielding's sharper eyes had discovered that one of the figures clinging to the wreck was too small for a grown person.

"It's a child!" she murmured. "It's a girl. Oh, Helen! there's a girl—no older than we—on that wreck!"

The words of the men standing about them proved Ruth's statement to be true. Others had descried the girl's figure in that perilous situation. There was a woman, too, and seven men. Seven men were ample to man a schooner of her size, and probably the other two were the captain's wife and daughter.

But if escape to the shore depended upon the work of the lifeboat and her crew, the castaways were in peril indeed, for the boat was coming shoreward now with a rush. With her came the tossing, charging timbers washed from the deck load. The sea between the reef and the beach was now a seething mass of broken and splintering planks and beams. No craft could live in such a seaway.

But Ruth and her friends were suddenly conscious of a peril nearer at hand. The broken lifeboat with its crew was being swept shoreward upon a great wave, and with the speed of an express train. The great, curling, foam-streaked breaker seemed to hurl the heavy boat through the air.

"They'll be killed! Oh, they will!" shrieked Mary Cox.

The long craft, half-smothered in foam, and accompanied by the plunging timbers from the wreck, darted shoreward with increasing velocity. One moment it was high above their heads, with the curling wave ready to break, and the sea sucking away beneath its keel—bared for half its length.

Crash! Down the boat was dashed, with a blow that (so it seemed to the unaccustomed spectators) must tear it asunder.

The crew were dashed from their places by the shock. The waiting longshoremen ran to seize the broken boat and drag it above high-water mark. One of the crew was sucked back with the undertow and disappeared for a full minute. But he came in, high on the next wave, and they caught and saved him.

To the amazement of Ruth Fielding and her young companions, none of the seven men who had manned the boat seemed much the worse for their experience. They breathed heavily and their faces were grim. She could almost have sworn that the youngest of the crew—he had the figure "6" worked on the sleev of his coat—had tears of disappointment in his eyes.

"It's a desperate shame, lads!" croaked old Cap'n Abinadab. "We're bested. And the old

boat's badly smashed. But there's one thing sure—no other boat, nor no other crew, couldn't do what we started to do. Ain't no kick comin' on that score."

"And can't the poor creatures out there be helped? Must they drown?" whispered Helen in Ruth's ear.

Ruth did not believe that these men would give up so easily. They were rough seamen; but the helplessness of the castaways appealed to them.

"Come on, boys!" commanded the captain of the life-saving crew. "Let's git out the wagon. I don't suppose there's any use, unless there comes a lull in this etarnal gale. But we'll try what gunpowder will do."

"What are they going to attempt now?" Madge Steele asked.

"The beach wagon," said somebody. "They've gone for the gear."

This was no explanation to the girls until Tom Cameron came running back from the house and announced that the crew were going to try to reach the schooner with a line.

"They'll try to save them with the breeches buoy," he said. "They've got a life-car here; but they never use that thing nowadays if they can help. Too many castaways have been near smothered in it, they say. If they can get a line

over the wreck they'll haul the crew in, one at a time."

"And that girl!" cried Ruth. "I hope they will send her ashore first. How frightened she must be."

There was no more rain falling now, although the spray whipped from the crests of the waves was flung across the beach and wet the sightseers. But with the lightening of the clouds a pale glow seemed to spread itself upon the tumultuous sea.

The wreck could be seen almost as vividly as when the signal lights were burned. The torn clouds were driven across the heavens as rapidly as the huge waves raced shoreward. And behind both cloud and wave was the seething gale. There seemed no prospect of the wind's falling.

Ruth turned to see the crew which had failed to get the lifeboat to the wreck, trundling a heavy, odd-looking, two-wheeled wagon down upon the beach. They worked as though their fight with the sea had been but the first round of the battle. Their calmness and skillful handling of the breeches-buoy gear inspired the onlookers with renewed hope.

"Oh, Cap'n Abinadab and the boys will get 'em this time," declared Heavy. "You just watch."

And Ruth Fielding and the others were not likely to miss any motion of the crew of the life saving station. The latter laid out the gear with quick, sure action. The cannon was placed in position and loaded. The iron bar to which the line was attached was slipped into the muzzle of the gun. The men stood back and the captain pulled the lanyard.

Bang!

The sharp bark of the line-gun echoed distressingly in their ears. It jumped back a pace, for the captain had charged it to the full limit allowed by the regulations. A heavier charge might burst the gun.

The line-iron hurtled out over the sea in a long, graceful curve, the line whizzing after it. The line unwound so rapidly from the frame on which it was coiled that Ruth's gaze could not follow it.

The sea was light enough for them to follow the course of the iron, however, and a groan broke from the lips of the onlookers when they saw that the missile fell far short of the wreck. To shoot the line into the very teeth of this gale, as Cap'n Abinadab had said, was futile. Yet he would not give up the attempt. This was the only way that was now left for them to aid the unfortunate crew of the lumber schooner. If they could not get the breeches buoy to her the sea would be the grave of the castaways.

For already the waves, smashing down upon the grounded wreck, were tearing it apart. She would soon break in two, and then the remaining rigging and spars would go by the board and with them the crew and passengers.

Yet Captain Abinadab Cope refused to give over his attempts to reach the wreck.

"Haul in!" he commanded gruffly, when the line fell short. Ruth marveled at the skill of the man who rewound the wet line on the pegs of the frame that held it. In less than five minutes the life savers were ready for another shot.

"You take it when the regular crew are at practice, sometimes," whispered Heavy, to Ruth, "and they work like lightning. They'll shoot the line and get a man ashore in the breeches buoy in less than two minutes. But this is hard work for these volunteers—and it means so much!"

Ruth felt as though a hand clutched at her heart. The unshed tears stung her eyes. If they should fail—if all this effort should go for naught! Suppose that unknown girl out there on the wreck should be washed ashore in the morning, pallid and dead.

The thought almost overwhelmed the girl from the Red Mill. As the gun barked a second time and the shot and line hurtled seaward, Ruth Fielding's pale lips uttered a whispered prayer.

CHAPTER X

THE DOUBLE CHARGE

But again the line fell short.

"They'll never be able to make it," Tom Cameron said to the shivering girls.

"Oh, I really wish we hadn't come down here," murmured his sister.

"Oh, pshaw, Nell! don't be a baby," he growled.

But he was either winking back the tears himself, or the salt spray had gotten into his eyes. How could anybody stand there on the beach and feel unmoved when nine human beings, in view now and then when the billows fell, were within an ace of awful death?

Again and again the gun was shotted and the captain pulled the lanyard. He tried to catch the moment when there was a lull in the gale; but each time the shot fell short. It seemed to be merely a waste of human effort and gunpowder.

"I've 'phoned to the Minot Cove station," the captain said, during one of the intervals while

they were hauling in the line. "They've got a power boat there, and if they can put to sea with her they might get around to the other side of the reef and take 'em off."

"She'll go to pieces before a boat can come from Minot Cove," declared one grizzled fisherman.

"I fear so, Henry," replied the captain. "But we got to do what we can. They ain't give me no leeway with this gun. Orders is never to give her a bigger charge than what she's gettin' now. But, I swan——"

He did not finish his sentence, but gravely measured out the next charge of powder. When he had loaded the gun he waved everybody back.

"Git clean away, you lads. All of ye, now! She'll probably blow up, but there ain't no use in more'n one of us blowin' up with her."

"What you done, Cap'n?" demanded one of his crew.

"Never you mind, lad. Step back, I tell ye. She's slewed right now, I reckon."

"What have you got in her?" demanded the man again.

"I'm goin' to reach them folk if I can," returned Cap'n Abinadab. "I've double charged her. If she don't carry the line this time, she never will. And she may carry it over the wreck, even if she blows up. Look out!"

"Don't ye do it!" cried the man, Mason, starting forward. "If you pull that lanyard ye'll be blowed sky-high."

"Well, who should pull it if I don't?" demanded the old captain of the station, grimly. "Guess old 'Binadab Cope ain't goin' to step back for you young fellers yet a while. Come! git, I tell ye! Far back—afar back."

"Oh! he'll be killed!" murmured Ruth.

"You come back here, Ruth Fielding!" commanded Tom, clutching her arm. "If that gun blows up we want to be a good bit away."

The whole party ran back. They saw the last of the crew leave the old captain. He stood firmly, at one side of the gun, his legs placed wide apart; they saw him pull the lanyard. Fire spat from the muzzle of the gun and with a shriek the shot-line was carried seaward, toward the wreck.

The old gun, double charged, turned a somersault and buried its muzzle in the sand. The captain dodged, and went down — perhaps thrown by the force of the explosion. But the gun did not burst.

However, he was upon his feet again in a moment, and all the crowd were shouting their congratulations. The flying line had carried squarely over the middle of the wreck.

"Now, will they know what to do with it?" gasped Ruth.

"Wait! see that man—that man in the middle? The line passed over his shoulder!" cried Heavy. "See! he's got it."

"And he's hauling on it," cried Tom.

"There goes the line with the board attached," said Madge Steele, exultantly. The girls had already examined this painted board. On it were plain, though brief, instructions in English, French, and Italian, to the wrecked crew as to what they should do to aid in their own rescue. But this schooner was probably from up Maine way, or the "blue-nose country" of Nova Scotia, and her crew would be familiar with the rigging of the breeches buoy.

They saw, as another light was burned on the wreck, the man who had seized the line creep along to the single mast then standing. It was broken short off fifteen feet above the deck. He hauled out the shotline, and then a mate came to his assistance and they rigged the larger line that followed and attached the block to the stump of the mast.

Then on shore the crew of the life saving station and the fishermen—even the boys from the bungalow—hauled on the cable, and soon sent the gear across the tossing waves. They had erected

a stout pair of wooden "shears" in the sand and over this the breeches buoy gear ran.

It went out empty, but the moment it reached the staggering wreck the men there popped the woman into the sack and those ashore hauled in. Over and through the waves she came, and when they caught her at the edge of the surf and dragged the heavy buoy on to the dry land, she was all but breathless, and was crying.

"Don't ye fear, Missus," said one rough but kindly boatman. "We'll have yer little gal ashore in a jiffy."

"She—she isn't my child, poor thing," panted the woman. "I'm Captain Kirby's wife. Poor Jim! he won't leave till the last one——"

"Of course he won't, ma'am—and you wouldn't want him to," broke in Cap'n Cope. "A skipper's got to stand by his ship till his crew an' passengers are safe. Now, you go right up to the station——"

"Oh, no, no!" she cried. "I must see them all safe ashore."

The huge buoy was already being hauled back to the wreck. There was no time to be lost, for the waves had torn away the after-deck and it was feared the forward deck and the mast would soon go.

Ruth went to the woman and spoke to her softly.

"Who is the little girl, please?" she asked.

"She ain't little, Miss—no littler than you," returned Mrs. Kirby. "Her name is Nita."

"Nita?"

"That's what she calls herself."

"Nita what?" asked Ruth.

"I don't know, I'm sure. I believe she's run away from her folks. She won't tell much about herself. She only came aboard at Portland. In fact, I found her there on the dock, and she seemed hungry and neglected, and she told us first that she wanted to go to her folks in New York —and that's where the *Whipstitch* was bound."

"The *Whipstitch* is the name of the schooner?"

"Yes, Miss. And now Jim's lost her. But—thanks be!—she was insured," said the captain's wife.

At that moment another hearty shout went up from the crowd on shore. The breeches buoy was at the wreck again. They saw the men there lift the girl into the buoy, which was rigged like a great pair of overalls. The passenger sat in this sack, with her legs thrust through the apertures below, and clung to the ring of the buoy, which was level with her shoulders.

She started from the ship in this rude conveyance, and the girls gathered eagerly to greet her when she landed. But several waves washed com-

pletely over the breeches buoy and the girl was each time buried from sight. She was unconscious when they lifted her out.

She was a black-haired girl of fourteen or thereabout, well built and strong. The captain's wife was too anxious about the crew to pay much attention to the waif, and Ruth and her friends bore Nita, the castaway, off to the station, where it was warm.

The boys remained to see the last of the crew—Captain Kirby himself—brought ashore. And none too soon was this accomplished, for within the half hour the schooner had broken in two. Its wreckage and the lumber with which it had been loaded so covered the sea between the reef and the shore that the waves were beaten down, and had it been completely calm an active man could have traveled dry-shod over the flotsam to the reef.

Meanwhile Nita had been brought to her senses. But there was nothing at the station for the girl from the wreck to put on while her own clothing was dried, and it was Heavy who came forward with a very sensible suggestion.

"Let's take her home with us. Plenty of things there. Wrap her up good and warm and we'll take her on the buckboard. We can all crowd on—all but the boys."

The boys had not seen enough yet, anyway,

and were not ready to go; but the girls were eager to return to the bungalow—especially when they could take the castaway with them.

"And there we'll get her to tell us all about it," whispered Helen to Ruth. "My! she must have an interesting story to tell."

CHAPTER XI

THE STORY OF THE CASTAWAY

THERE was only the cook in the station and nobody to stop the girls from taking Nita away. She had recovered her senses, but scarcely appreciated as yet where she was; nor did she seem to care what became of her.

Heavy called the man who had driven them over, and in ten minutes after she was ashore the castaway was on the buckboard with her new friends and the ponies were bearing them all at a spanking pace toward the Stone bungalow on Lighthouse Point.

The fact that this strange girl had been no relation of the wife of the schooner's captain, and that Mrs. Kirby seemed, indeed, to know very little about her, mystified the stout girl and her friends exceedingly. They whispered a good deal among themselves about the castaway; but she sat between Ruth and Helen and they said little to her during the ride.

She had been wrapped in a thick blanket at the station and was not likely to take cold; but Miss

Kate and old Mammy Laura bustled about a good deal when Nita was brought into the bungalow; and very shortly she was tucked into one of the beds on the second floor—in the very room in which Ruth and Helen and Mercy were to sleep—and Miss Kate had insisted upon her swallowing a bowl of hot tea.

Nita seemed to be a very self-controlled girl. She didn't weep, now that the excitement was past, as most girls would have done. But at first she was very silent, and watched her entertainers with snapping black eyes and — Ruth thought—in rather a sly, sharp way. She seemed to be studying each and every one of the girls—and Miss Kate and Mammy Laura as well.

The boys came home after a time and announced that every soul aboard the *Whipstitch* was safe and sound in the life saving station. And the captain's wife had sent over word that she and her husband would go back to Portland the next afternoon. If the girl they had picked up there on the dock wished to return, she must be ready to go with them.

"What, go back to that town?" cried the castaway when Ruth told her this, sitting right up in bed. "Why, that's the *last* place!"

"Then you don't belong in Portland?" asked Ruth.

"I should hope not!"

"Nor in Maine?" asked Madge, for the other girls were grouped about the room. They were all anxious to hear the castaway's story.

The girl was silent for a moment, her lips very tightly pressed together. Finally she said, with her sly look:

"I guess I ain't obliged to tell you that; am I?"

"Witness does not wish to incriminate herself," snapped Mercy, her eyes dancing.

"Well, I don't know that I'm bound to tell you girls everything I know," said the strange girl, coolly.

"Right-oh!" cried Heavy, cordially. "You're visiting me. I don't know as it is anybody's business how you came to go aboard the *Whipstitch*——"

"Oh, I don't mind telling you that," said the girl, eagerly. "I was hungry."

"Hungry!" chorused her listeners, and Heavy said: "Fancy being hungry, and having to go aboard a ship to get a meal!"

"That was it exactly," said Nita, bluntly. "But Mrs. Kirby was real good to me. And the schooner was going to New York and that's where I wanted to go."

"Because your folks live there?" shot in The Fox.

"No, they don't, Miss Smartie!" snapped back the castaway. "You don't catch me so easy.

I wasn't born yesterday, Miss! My folks don't live in New York. Maybe I haven't any folks. I came from clear way out West, anyway—so now! I thought 'way down East must be the finest place in the world. But it isn't."

"Did you run away to come East?" asked Ruth, quietly.

"Well—I came here, anyway. And I don't much like it, I can tell you."

"Ah-ha!" cried Mercy Curtis, chuckling to herself. "I know. She thought Yankee Land was just flowing in milk and honey. Listen! here's what she said to herself before she ran away from home:

"I wish I'd lived away Down East,
Where codfish salt the sea,
And where the folks have apple sass
And punkin pie fer tea!"

That's the 'Western Girl's Lament,'" pursued Mercy. "So you found 'way down East nothing like what you thought it was?"

The castaway scowled at the sharp-tongued lame girl for a moment. Then she nodded. "It's the folks," she said. "You're all so afraid of a stranger. Do I look like I'd *bite?*"

"Maybe not ordinarily," said Helen, laughing softly. "But you do not look very pleasant just now."

"Well, people haven't been nice to me," grumbled the Western girl. "I thought there were lots of rich men in the East, and that a girl could make friends 'most anywhere, and get into nice families——"

"To *work?*" asked Ruth, curiously.

"No, no! You know, you read a lot about rich folks taking up girls and doing everything for them—dressing them fine, and sending them to fancy schools, and all that."

"I never read of any such thing in my life!" declared Mary Cox. "I guess you've been reading funny books."

"Huh!" sniffed the castaway, who was evidently a runaway and was not made sorry for her escapade even by being wrecked at sea. "Huh! I like a story with some life in it, I do! Jib Pottoway had some dandy paper-covered novels in his locker and he let me read 'em——"

"Who under the sun is Jib Pottoway?" gasped Helen. "That isn't a real name; is it?"

"It's ugly enough to be real; isn't it?" retorted the strange girl, chuckling. "Yep. That's Jib's real name. 'Jibbeway Pottoway'—that's the whole of it."

"Oh, oh!" cried Heavy, with her hand to her face. "It makes my jaw ache to even try to say it."

"What is he?" asked Madge, curiously.

"Injun," returned the Western girl, laconically. "Or, part Injun. He comes from 'way up Canada way. His folks had Jibbeway blood."

"But *who* is he?" queried Ruth, curiously.

"Why, he's a puncher that works for—— Well, he's a cow puncher. That's 'nuff. It don't matter where he works," added the girl, gruffly.

"That might give away where you come from, eh?" put in Mercy.

"It might," and Nita laughed.

"But what is your name?" asked Ruth.

"Nita, I tell you."

"Nita what?"

"Never mind. Just Nita. Mebbe I never had another name. Isn't one name at a time sufficient, Miss?"

"I don't believe that is your really-truly name," said Ruth, gravely.

"I bet you're right, Ruth Fielding!" cried Heavy, chuckling. "'Nita' and 'Jib Pottoway' don't seem to go together. 'Nita' is altogether too fancy."

"It's a nice name!" exclaimed the strange girl, in some anger. "It was the name of the girl in the paper-covered novel—and it's good enough for me."

"But what's your real name?" urged Ruth.

"I'm not telling you that," replied the runaway, shortly.

"Then you prefer to go under a false name—even among your friends?" asked the girl from the Red Mill.

"How do I know you're my friends?" demanded Nita, promptly.

"We can't very well be your enemies," said Helen, in some disgust.

"I don't know. Anybody's my enemy who wants to send me back—well, anyone who wants to return me to the place I came from."

"Was it an institution?" asked Mary Cox, quickly.

"What's that?" demanded Nita, puzzled. "What do you mean by an 'institution'?"

"She means a sort of school," explained Ruth.

"Yes!" exclaimed The Fox, sharply. "A reform school, or something of the kind. Maybe an almshouse."

"Never heard of 'em," returned Nita, unruffled by the insinuation. "Guess they don't have 'em where I come from. Did *you* go to one, Miss?"

Heavy giggled, and Madge Steele rapped The Fox smartly on the shoulder. "There!" said the senior. "It serves you right, Mary Cox. You're answered."

"Now, I tell you what it is!" cried the strange girl, sitting up in bed again and looking rather

flushed, "if you girls are going to nag me, and bother me about who I am, and where I come from, and what my name is—though Nita's a good enough name for anybody——"

"Anybody but Jib Pottoway," chuckled Heavy.

"Well! and *he* warn't so bad, if he *was* half Injun," snapped the runaway. "Well, anyway, if you don't leave me alone I'll get out of bed right now and walk out of here. I guess you haven't any hold on me."

"Better wait till your clothes are dry," suggested Madge.

"Aunt Kate would never let you go," said Heavy.

"I'll go to-morrow morning, then!" cried the runaway.

"Why, we don't mean to nag you," interposed Ruth, soothingly. "But of course we're curious —and interested."

"You're like all the other Eastern folk I've met," declared Nita. "And I don't like you much. I thought *you* were different."

"You've been expecting some rich man to adopt you, and dress you in lovely clothes, and all that, eh?" said Mercy Curtis.

"Well! I guess there are not so many millionaires in the East as they said there was," grumbled Nita.

"Or else they've already got girls of their own

to look after," laughed Ruth. "Why, Helen here, has a father who is very rich. But you couldn't expect him to give up Helen and Tom and take you into his home instead, could you?"

Nita glanced at the dry goods merchant's daughter with more interest for a moment.

"And Heavy's father is awfully rich, too," said Ruth. "But he's got Heavy to support——"

"And that's some job," broke in Madge, laughing. "Two such daughters as Heavy would make poor dear Papa Stone a pauper!"

"Well," said Nita, again, "I've talked enough. I won't tell you where I come from. And Nita *is* my name—now!"

"It is getting late," said Ruth, mildly. "Don't you all think it would be a good plan to go to bed? The wind's gone down some. I guess we can sleep."

"Good advice," agreed Madge Steele. "The boys have been abed some time. To-morrow is another day."

Heavy and she and Mary went off to their room. The others made ready for bed, and the runaway did not say another word to them, but turned her face to the wall and appeared, at least, to be soon asleep.

Ruth crept in beside her so as not to disturb their strange guest. She was a new type of girl to Ruth—and to the others. Her independence

of speech, her rough and ready ways, and her evident lack of the influence of companionship with refined girls were marked in this Nita's character.

Ruth wondered much what manner of home she could have come from, why she had run away from it, and what Nita really proposed doing so far from home and friends. These queries kept the girl from the Red Mill awake for a long time—added to which was the excitement of the evening, which was not calculated to induce sleep.

She would have dropped off some time after the other girls, however, had she not suddenly heard a door latch somewhere on this upper floor, and then the creep, creep, creeping of a rustling step in the hall. It continued so long that Ruth wondered if one of the girls in the other room was ill, and she softly arose and went to the door, which was ajar. And what she saw there in the hall startled her.

CHAPTER XII

BUSY IZZY IN A NEW ASPECT

THE stair-well was a wide and long opening and around it ran a broad balustrade. There was no stairway to the third floor of this big bungalow, only the servants' staircase in the rear reaching those rooms directly under the roof. So the hall on this second floor, out of which the family bedrooms opened, was an L-shaped room, with the balustrade on one hand.

And upon that balustrade Ruth Fielding beheld a tottering figure in white, plainly visible in the soft glow of the single light burning below, yet rather ghostly after all.

She might have been startled in good earnest had she not first of all recognized Isadore Phelps' face. He was balancing himself upon the balustrade and, as she came to the door, he walked gingerly along the narrow strip of moulding toward Ruth.

"Izzy! whatever are you doing?" she hissed.

The boy never said a word to her, but kept right on, balancing himself with difficulty. He

was in his pajamas, his feet bare, and—she saw it at last—his eyes tight shut.

"Oh! he's asleep," murmured Ruth.

And that surely was Busy Izzy's state at that moment. Sound asleep and "tight-rope walking" on the balustrade.

Ruth knew that it would be dangerous to awaken him suddenly—especially as it might cause him to fall down the stair-well. She crept back into her room and called Helen. The two girls in their wrappers and slippers went into the hall again. There was Busy Izzy tottering along in the other direction, having turned at the wall. Once they thought he would plunge down the stairway, and Helen grabbed at Ruth with a squeal of terror.

"Sh!" whispered her chum. "Go tell Tom. Wake him up. The boys ought to tie Izzy in bed if he is in the habit of doing this."

"My! isn't he a sight!" giggled Helen, as she ran past the gyrating youngster, who had again turned for a third perambulation of the railing.

She whispered Tom's name at his open door and in a minute the girls heard him bound out of bed. He was with them—sleepy-eyed and hastily wrapping his robe about him—in a moment.

"For the land's sake!" he gasped, when he saw his friend on the balustrade. "What are you——"

"Sh!" commanded Ruth. "He's asleep."

Tom took in the situation at a glance. Madge Steele peered out of her door at that moment. "Who is it—Bobbins?" she asked.

"No. It's Izzy. He's walking in his sleep," said Ruth.

"He's a regular somnambulist," exclaimed Helen.

"Never mind. Don't call him names. He can't help it," said Madge.

Helen giggled again. Tom had darted back to rouse his chum. Bob Steele appeared, more tousled and more sleepy-looking than Tom.

"What's the matter with that fellow now?" he grumbled. "He's like a flea—you never know where he's going to be next! Ha! he'll fall off that and break his silly neck."

And as Busy Izzy was just then nearest his end of the hall in his strange gyrations, Bob Steele stepped forward and grabbed him, lifting him bodily off the balustrade. Busy Izzy screeched, but Tom clapped a hand over his mouth.

"Shut up! want to raise the whole neighborhood?" grunted Bobbins, dragging the lightly attired, struggling boy back into their room. "Ha! I'll fix you after this. I'll lash you to the bedpost every night we're here—now mark that, young man!"

It seemed that the youngster often walked in

his sleep, but the girls had not known it. Usually, at school, his roommates kept the dormitory door locked and the key hidden, so that he couldn't get out to do himself any damage running around with his eyes shut.

The party all got to sleep again after that and there was no further disturbance before morning. They made a good deal of fun of Isadore at the breakfast table, but he took the joking philosophically. He was always playing pranks himself; but he had learned to take a joke, too.

He declared that all he dreamed during the night was that he was wrecked in an iceboat on Second Reef and that the only way for him to get ashore was to walk on a cable stretched from the wreck to the beach. He had probably been walking that cable—in his mind—when Ruth had caught him balancing on the balustrade.

The strange girl who persisted in calling herself "Nita" came down to the table in some of Heavy's garments, which were a world too large for her. Her own had been so shrunk and stained by the sea-water that they would never be fit to put on again. Aunt Kate was very kind to her, but she looked at the runaway oddly, too. Nita had been just as uncommunicative to her as she had been to the girls in the bedroom the night before.

"If you don't like me, or don't like my name,

I can go away," she declared to Miss Kate, coolly. "I haven't got to stay here, you know."

"But where will you go? what will you do?" demanded that young lady, severely. "You say the captain of the schooner and his wife are nothing to you?"

"I should say not!" exclaimed Nita. "They were nice and kind to me, though."

"And you can't go away until you have something decent to wear," added Heavy's aunt. "That's the first thing to 'tend to."

And although it was a bright and beautiful morning after the gale, and there were a dozen things the girls were all eager to see, they spent the forenoon in trying to make up an outfit for Nita so that she would be presentable. The boys went off with Mr. Stone's boatkeeper in the motor launch and Mary Cox was quite cross because the other girls would not leave Miss Kate to fix up Nita the best she could, so that they could all accompany the boys. But in the afternoon the buckboard was brought around and they drove to the lighthouse.

Nita, even in her nondescript garments, was really a pretty girl. No awkwardness of apparel could hide the fact that she had nice features and that her body was strong and lithe. She moved about with a freedom that the other girls did not possess. Even Ruth was not so athletic as the

strange girl. And yet she seemed to know nothing at all about the games and the exercises which were commonplace to the girls from Briarwood Hall.

There was a patch of wind-blown, stunted trees and bushes covering several acres of the narrowing point, before the driving road along the ridge brought the visitors to Sokennet Light. While they were driving through this a man suddenly bobbed up beside the way and the driver hailed him.

"Hullo, you Crab!" he said. "Found anything 'long shore from that wreck?"

The man stood up straight and the girls thought him a very horrid-looking object. He had a great beard and his hair was dark and long.

"He's a bad one for looks; ain't he, Miss?" asked the driver of Ruth, who sat beside him.

"He isn't very attractive," she returned.

"Ha! I guess not. And Crab's as bad as he looks, which is saying a good deal. He comes of the 'wreckers.' Before there was a light here, or life saving stations along this coast, there was folks lived along here that made their livin' out of poor sailors wrecked out there on the reefs. Some said they used to toll vessels onto the rocks with false lights. Anyhow, Crab's father, and his gran'ther, was wreckers. He's assistant light-

keeper; but he oughtn't to be. I don't see how Mother Purling can get along with him."

"She isn't afraid of him; is she?" queried Ruth.

"She isn't afraid of anything," asid Heavy, quickly, from the rear seat. "You wait till you see her."

The buckboard went heavily on toward the lighthouse; but the girls saw that the man stood for a long time—as long as they were in sight, at least—staring after them.

"What do you suppose he looked at Nita so hard for?" whispered Helen in Ruth's ear. "I thought he was going to speak to her."

But Ruth had not noticed this, nor did the runaway girl seem to have given the man any particular attention.

CHAPTER XIII

CRAB PROVES TO BE OF THE HARDSHELL VARIETY

THEY came to the lighthouse. There was only a tiny, whitewashed cottage at the foot of the tall shaft. It seemed a long way to the brass-trimmed and glistening lantern at the top. Ruth wondered how the gaunt old woman who came to the door to welcome them could ever climb those many, many stairs to the narrow gallery at the top of the shaft. She certainly could not suffer as Aunt Alvirah did with *her* back and bones.

Sokennet Light was just a steady, bright light, sending its gleam far seaward. There was no mechanism for turning, such as marks the revolving lights in so many lighthouses. The simplicity of everything about Sokennet Light was what probably led the department officials to allow Mother Purling to remain after her husband died in harness.

"Jack Crab has done his cleaning and gone about his business," said Mother Purling, to the girls. "Ye may all climb up to the lantern if ye wish; but touch nothing."

Beside the shaft of the light was a huge fog

bell. That was rung by clockwork. Mother Purling showed Ruth and her companions how it worked before the girls started up the stairs. Mercy remained in the little house with the good old woman, for she never could have hobbled up those spiral stairs.

"It's too bad about that girl," said Nita, brusquely, to Ruth. "Has she always been lame?"

Ruth warmed toward the runaway immediately when she found that Nita was touched by Mercy Curtis' affliction. She told Nita how the lame girl had once been much worse off than she was now, and all about her being operated on by the great physician.

"She's so much better off now than she was!" cried Ruth. "And so much happier!"

"But she's a great nuisance to have along," snapped Mary Cox, immediately behind them. "She had better stayed at home, I should think."

Ruth flushed angrily, but before she could speak, Nita said, looking coolly at The Fox:

"You're a might snappy, snarly sort of a girl; ain't you? And you think you are dreadfully smart. But somebody told you that. It ain't so. I've seen a whole lot smarter than you. You wouldn't last long among the boys where *I* come from."

"Thank you!" replied Mary, her head in the air. "I wouldn't care to be liked by the boys. It isn't ladylike to think of the boys all the time——"

"These are grown men, I mean," said Nita, coolly. "The punchers that work for—well, just cow punchers. You call them cowboys. They know what's good and fine, jest as well as Eastern folks. And a girl that talks like you do about a cripple wouldn't go far with them."

"I suppose your friend, the half-Indian, is a critic of deportment," said The Fox, with a laugh.

"Well, Jib wouldn't say anything mean about a cripple," said Nita, in her slow way, and The Fox seemed to have no reply.

But this little by-play drew Ruth Fielding closer to the queer girl who had selected her "hifalutting" name because it was the name of a girl in a paper-covered novel.

Nita had lived out of doors, that was plain. Ruth believed, from what the runaway had said, that she came from the plains of the great West. She had lived on a ranch. Perhaps her folks owned a ranch, and they might even now be searching the land over for their daughter. The thought made the girl from the Red Mill very serious, and she determined to try and gain Nita's confidence and influence her, if she could, to tell the truth about herself and to go back to her

home. She knew that she could get Mr. Cameron to advance Nita's fare to the West, if the girl would return.

But up on the gallery in front of the shining lantern of the lighthouse there was no chance to talk seriously to the runaway. Heavy had to sit down when she reached this place, and she declared that she puffed like a steam engine. Then, when she had recovered her breath, she pointed out the places of interest to be seen from the tower—the smoke of Westhampton to the north; Fuller's Island, with its white sands and gleaming green lawns and clumps of wind-blown trees; the long strip of winding coast southward, like a ribbon laid down for the sea to wash, and far, far to the east, over the tumbling waves, still boisterous with the swell of last night's storm, the white riding sail of the lightship on No Man's Shoal.

They came down after an hour, wind-blown, the taste of salt on their lips, and delighted with the view. They found the ugly, hairy man sitting on the doorstep, listening with a scowl and a grin to Mercy's sharp speeches.

"I don't know what brought you back here to the light, Jack Crab, at this time of day," said Mother Purling. "You ain't wanted."

"I likes to see comp'ny, too, *I* do," growled the man.

"Well, these girls ain't your company," returned the old woman. "Now! get up and be off. Get out of the way."

Crab rose, surlily enough, but his sharp eyes sought Nita. He looked her all over, as though she were some strange object that he had never seen before.

"So you air the gal they brought ashore off the lumber schooner last night?" he asked her.

"Yes, I am," she returned, flatly.

"You ain't got no folks around here; hev ye?" he continued.

"No, I haven't."

"What's your name?"

"Puddin' Tame!" retorted Mercy, breaking in, in her shrill way. "And she lives in the lane, and her number's cucumber! There now! do you know all you want to know, Hardshell?"

Crab growled something under his breath and went off in a hangdog way.

"That's a bad man," said Mercy, with confidence. "And he's much interested in you, Miss Nita Anonymous. Do you know why?"

"I'm sure I don't," replied Nita, laughing quite as sharply as before, but helping the lame girl to the buckboard with kindliness.

"You look out for him, then," said Mercy, warningly. "He's a hardshell crab, all right.

And either he thinks he knows you, or he's got something in his mind that don't mean good to you."

But only Ruth heard this. The others were bidding Mother Purling good-bye.

CHAPTER XIV

THE TRAGIC INCIDENT IN A FISHING EXCURSION

THE boys had returned when the party drove back to the bungalow from the lighthouse. A lighthouse might be interesting, and it was fine to see twenty-odd miles to the No Man's Shoal, and Mother Purling might be a *dear*—but the girls hadn't done anything, and the boys had. They had fished for halibut and had caught a sixty-five-pound one. Bobbins had got it on his hook; but it took all three of them, with the boat-keeper's advice, to get the big, flapping fish over the side.

They had part of that fish for supper. Heavy was enraptured, and the other girls had a salt-water appetite that made them enjoy the fish, too. It was decided to try for blackfish off the rocks beyond Sokennet the next morning.

"We'll go over in the *Miraflame*"—(that was the name of the motor boat)—"and we'll take somebody with us to help Phineas," Heavy declared. Phineas was the boatman who had

charge of Mr. Stone's little fleet. "Phin is a great cook and he'll get us up a regular fish dinner——"

"Oh, dear, Jennie Stone! how *can* you?" broke in Helen, with her hands clasped.

"How can I *what,* Miss?" demanded the stout girl, scenting trouble.

"How can you, when we are eating such a perfect dinner as this, be contemplating any other future occasion when we possibly shall be hungry?"

The others laughed, but Heavy looked at her school friends with growing contempt. "You talk—you talk," she stammered, "well! you don't talk English—that I'm sure of! And you needn't put it all on me. You all eat with good appetites. And you'd better thank me, not quarrel with me. If I didn't think of getting nice things to eat, you'd miss a lot, now I tell you. You don't know how I went out in Mammy Laura's kitchen this very morning, before most of you had your hair out of curl-papers, and just *slaved* to plan the meals for to-day."

"Hear! hear!" chorused the boys, drumming with their knife handles on the table. "We're for Jennie! She's all right."

"See!" flashed in Mercy, with a gesture. "Miss Stone has won the masculine portion of the community by the only unerring way—the only

straight path to the heart of a boy is through his stomach."

"I guess we can all thank Jennie," said Ruth, laughing quietly, "for her attention to our appetites. But I fear if she had expected to fast herself to-day she'd still be abed!"

They were all lively at dinner, and they spent a lively evening, towards the end of which Bob Steele gravely went out of doors and brought in an old boat anchor, or kedge, weighing so many pounds that even he could scarcely carry it upstairs to the bed chamber which he shared with Tom and Isadore.

"What are you going to do with that thing, Bobby Steele?" demanded his sister.

"Going to anchor Busy Izzy to it with a rope. I bet he won't walk far in his sleep to-night," declared Bobbins.

With the fishing trip in their minds, all were astir early the next morning. Miss Kate had agreed to go with them, for Mercy believed that she could stand the trip, as the sea was again calm. She could remain in the cabin of the motor boat while the others were fishing off the rocks for tautog and rock-bass. The boys all had poles; but the girls said they would be content to cast their lines from the rock and hope for nibbles from the elusive blackfish.

The *Miraflame* was a roomy craft and well

furnished. When they started at nine o'clock the party numbered eleven, besides the boatman and his assistant. To the surprise of Ruth—and it was remarked in whispers by the other girls, too —Phineas, the boatkeeper, had chosen Jack Crab to assist him in the management of the motor boat.

"Jack doesn't have to be at the light till dark. The old lady gets along all right alone," explained Phineas. "And it ain't many of these 'longshoremen who know how to handle a motor. Jack's used to machinery."

He seemed to feel that it was necessary to excuse himself for hiring the hairy man. But Heavy only said:

"Well, as long as he behaves himself I don't care. But I didn't suppose you liked the fellow, Phin."

"I don't. It was Hobson's choice, Miss," returned the sailor.

Phineas, the girls found, was a very pleasant and entertaining man. And he knew all about fishing. He had supplied the bait for tautog, and the girls and boys of the party, all having lived inland, learned many things that they hadn't known before.

"Look at this!" cried Madge Steele, the first to discover a miracle. "He says this bait for tautog is scallops! Now, that quivering, jelly-like

body is never a scallop. Why, a scallop is a firm, white lump——"

"It's a mussel," said Heavy, laughing.

"It's only the 'eye' of the scallop you eat, Miss," explained Phineas.

"Now I know just as much as I did before," declared Madge. "So I eat a scallop's *eye,* do I? We had them for breakfast this very morning—with bacon."

"So you did, Miss. I raked 'em up myself yesterday afternoon," explained Phineas. "You eat the 'eye,' but these are the bodies, and they are the reg'lar natural food of the tautog, or blackfish."

"The edible part of the scallop is that muscle which adheres to the shell—just like the muscle that holds the clam to its shell," said Heavy, who, having spent several summers at the shore, was better informed than her friends.

Phineas showed the girls how to bait their hooks with the soft bodies of the scallop, warning them to cover the point of the hooks well, and to pull quickly if they felt the least nibble.

"The tautog is a small-mouthed fish—smaller, even, than the bass the boys are going to cast for. So, when he touches the hook at all, you want to grab him."

"Does it *hurt* the fish to be caught?" asked Helen, curiously.

Phineas grinned. "I never axed 'em, ma'am," he said.

The *Miraflame* carried them swiftly down the cove, or harbor, of Sokennet and out past the light. The sea was comparatively calm, but the surf roared against the rocks which hedged in the sand dunes north of the harbor's mouth. It was in this direction that Phineas steered the launch, and for ten miles the craft spun along at a pace that delighted the whole party.

"We're just skimming the water!" cried Tom Cameron. "Oh, Nell! I'm going to coax father till he buys one for us to use on the Lumano."

"I'll help tease," agreed his twin, her eyes sparkling.

Nita, the runaway, looked from brother to sister with sudden interest. "Does your father give you everything you ask him for?" she demanded.

"Not much!" cried Tom. "But dear old dad is pretty easy with us and—Mrs. Murchiston says —gives in to us too much."

"But, does he buy you such things as boats—right out—for you just to play with?"

"Why, of course!" cried Tom.

"And I couldn't even have a piano," muttered Nita, turning away with a shrug. "I told him he was a mean old hunks!"

"Whom did you say that to?" asked Ruth, quietly.

"Never you mind!" returned Nita, angrily. "But that's what he is."

Ruth treasured these observations of the runaway. She was piecing them together, and although as yet it was a very patched bit of work, she was slowly getting a better idea of who Nita was and her home surroundings.

Finally the *Miraflame* ran in between a sheltering arm of rock and the mainland. The sea was very still in here, the heave and surge of the water only murmuring among the rocks. There was an old fishing dock at which the motor boat was moored. Then everybody went ashore and Phineas and Jack Crab pointed out the best fishing places along the rocks.

These were very rugged ledges, and the water sucked in among them, and hissed, and chuckled, and made all sorts of gurgling sounds while the tide rose. There were small caves and little coves and all manner of odd hiding places in the rocks.

But the girls and boys were too much interested in the proposed fishing to bother about anything else just then. Phineas placed Ruth on the side of a round-topped boulder, where she stood on a very narrow ledge, with a deep green pool at her feet. She was hidden from the other fishers—even from the boys, who clambered around to the tiny cape that sheltered the basin into which the

motor boat had been run, and from the point of which they expected to cast for bass.

"Now, Miss," said the boatkeeper, "down at the bottom of this still pool Mr. Tautog is feeding on the rocks. Drop your baited hook down gently to him. And if he nibbles, pull sharply at first, and then, with a stead, hand-over-hand motion, draw him in."

Ruth was quite excited; but once she saw Nita and the man, Crab, walking farther along the rocks, and Ruth wondered that the fellow was so attentive to the runaway. But this was merely a passing thought. Her mind returned to the line she watched.

She pulled it up after a long while; the hook was bare. Either Mr. Tautog had been very, very careful when he nibbled the bait, or the said bait had slipped off. It was not easy to make the jelly-like body of the scallop remain on the hook. But Ruth was as anxious to catch a fish as the other girls, and she had watched Phineas with sharp and eager eyes when he baited the hook.

Ruth dropped it over the edge of the rock again after a minute. It sank down, down, down—— Was that a nibble? She felt the faintest sort of a jerk on the line. Surely something was at the bait!

Again the jerk. Ruth returned the compliment

by giving the line a prompt tug. Instantly she knew that she had hooked him!

"Oh! *oh!* OH!" she gasped, in a rising scale of delight and excitement.

She pulled in on the line. The fish was heavy, and he tried to pull his way, too. The blackfish is not much of a fighter, but he can sag back and do his obstinate best to remain in the water when the fisher is determined to get him out.

This fellow weighed two pounds and a half and was well hooked. Ruth, her cheeks glowing, her eyes dancing, hauled in, and in, and in——

There he came out of the water, a plump, glistening body, that flapped and floundered in the air, and on the ledge at her feet. She desired mightily to cry out; but Phineas had warned them all to be still while they fished. Their voices might scare all the fish away.

She unhooked it beautifully, seizing it firmly in the gills. Phineas had shown her where to lay any she might catch in a little cradle in the rock behind her. It was a damp little hollow, and Mr. Tautog could not flop out into the sea again.

Oh! it was fun to bait the hook once more with trembling fingers, and heave the weighted line over the edge of the narrow ledge on which she stood. There might be another—perhaps even a bigger one—waiting down there to seize upon the bait.

And just then Mary Cox, her hair tousled and a distressfully discontented expression on her face, came around the corner of the big boulder.

"Oh! Hullo!" she said, discourteously. "You here?"

"Sh!" whispered Ruth, intent on the line and the pool of green water.

"What's the matter with you?" snapped The Fox. "Don't say you've got a bite! I'm sick of hearing them say it over there——"

"I've caught one," said Ruth, with pride, pointing to the glistening tautog lying on the rock.

"Oh! Of course, 'twould be you who got it," snarled Mary. "I bet he gave you the best place."

"*Please* keep still!" begged Ruth. "I believe I've got another bite."

"Have a dozen for all I care," returned Mary. "I want to get past you."

"Wait! I feel a nibble——"

But Mary pushed rudely by. She took the inside of the path, of course. The ledge was very narrow, and Ruth was stooping over the deep pool, breathlessly watching the line.

With a half-stifled scream Ruth fell forward, flinging out both hands. Mary clutched at her—she *did* try to save her. But she was not quick enough. Ruth dropped like a plummet and the green water closed over her with scarcely a splash.

Mary did not cry out. She was speechless with fear, and stood with clasped hands, motionless, upon the path.

"She can swim! she can swim!" was the thought that shuttled back and forth in The Fox's brain.

But moment after moment passed and Ruth did not come to the surface. The pool was as calm as before, save for the vanishing rings that broke against the surrounding rocks. Mary held her breath. She began to feel as though it were a dream, and that her school companion had not really fallen into the pool. It must be an hallucination, for Ruth did not come to the surface again!

CHAPTER XV

TOM CAMERON TO THE RESCUE

THE three boys were on the other side of the narrow inlet where the *Miraflame* lay. Phineas had told them that bass were more likely to be found upon the ocean side; therefore they were completely out of sight.

The last Tom, Bob and Isadore saw of the girls, the fishermen were placing them along the rocky path, and Mercy was lying in a deck chair on the deck of the launch, fluttering a handkerchief at them as they went around the end of the reef.

"I bet they don't get a fish," giggled Isadore. "And even Miss Kate's got a line! What do girls know about fishing?"

"If there's any tautog over there, I bet Helen and Ruth get 'em. They're all right in any game," declared the loyal Tom.

"Madge will squeal and want somebody to take the fish off her hook, if she does catch one," grinned Bob. "She puts on lots of airs because she's the oldest; but she's a regular 'scare-cat,' after all."

"Helen and Ruth are good fellows," returned Tom, with emphasis. "They're quite as good fun as the ordinary boy—of course, not you, Bobbins, or Busy Izzy here; but they are all right."

"What do you think of that Nita girl?" asked Busy Izzy, suddenly.

"I believe there's something to her," declared Bob, with conviction. "She ain't afraid of a living thing, I bet!"

"There is something queer about her," Tom added, thoughtfully. "Have you noticed how that Crab fellow looks at her?"

"I see he hangs about her a good bit," said Isadore, quickly. "Why, do you suppose?"

"That's what I'd like to know," returned Tom Cameron.

They were now where Phineas had told them bass might be caught, and gave their attention to their tackle. All three boys had fished for perch, pike, and other gamey fresh-water fish; but this was their first casting with a rod into salt water.

"A true disciple of Izaak Walton should be dumb," declared Tom, warningly eyeing Isadore.

"Isn't he allowed any leeway at all—not even when he lands a fish?" demanded the irrepressible.

"Not above a whisper," grunted Bob Steele, trying to bait his hook with his thumb instead of the bait provided by Phineas. "Jingo!"

"Old Bobbins has got the first bite," chuckled Tom, under his breath, as he made his cast.

The reel whirred and the hook fell with a light splash into a little eddy where the water seemed to swirl about a sunken rock.

"You won't catch anything there," asid Isadore.

"I'll gag you if you don't shut up," promised Tom.

Suddenly his line straightened out. The hook seemed to be sucked right down into a hole between the rocks, and the reel began to whir. It stopped and Tom tried it.

"Pshaw! that ain't a bite," whispered Isadore.

At Tom's first attempt to reel in, the fish that had seized his hook started—for Spain! At least, it shot seaward, and the boy knew that Spain was about the nearest dry land if the fish kept on in that direction.

"A strike!" Tom gasped and let his reel sing for a moment or two. Then, when the drag of the line began to tell on the bass, he carefully wound in some of it. The fish turned and finally ran toward the rocks once more. Then Tom wound up as fast as he could, trying to keep the line taut.

"He'll tangle you all up, Tommy," declared Bob, unable, like Isadore, to keep entirely still.

Tom was flushed and excited, but said never a

word. He played the big bass with coolness after all, and finally tired it out, keeping it clear of the tangles of weed down under the rock, and drew it forth—a plump, flopping, gasping victim.

Bob and Isadore were then eager to do as well and began whipping the water about the rocks with more energy than skill. Tom, delighted with his first kill, ran over the rocks with the fish to show it to the girls. As he surmounted the ridge of the rocky cape he suddenly saw Nita, the runaway, and Jack Crab, in a little cove right below him. The girl and the fisherman had come around to this side of the inlet, away from Phineas and the other girls.

They did not see Tom behind and above them. Nita was not fishing, and Crab had unfolded a paper and was showing it to her. At this distance the paper seemed like a page torn from some newspaper, and there were illustrations as well as reading text upon the sheet which Crab held before the strange girl's eyes.

"There it is!" Tom heard the lighthouse keeper's assistant say, in an exultant tone. "You know what I could get if I wanted to show this to the right parties. *Now,* what d'ye think of it, Sissy?"

What Nita thought, or what she said, Tom did not hear. Indeed, scarcely had the two come into his line of vision, and he heard these words, when

something much farther away—across the inlet, in fact—caught the boy's attention.

He could see his sister and some of the other girls fishing from the rocky path; but directly opposite where he stood was Ruth. He saw Mary Cox meet and speak with her, the slight struggle of the two girls for position on the narrow ledge, and Ruth's plunge into the water.

"Oh, by George!" shouted Tom, as Ruth went under, and he dropped the flopping bass and went down the rocks at a pace which endangered both life and limb. His shout startled Nita and Jack Crab. But they had not seen Ruth fall, nor did they understand Tom's great excitement.

The inlet was scarcely more than a hundred yards across; but it was a long way around to the spot where Ruth had fallen, or been pushed, from the rock. Tom never thought of going the long way to the place. He tore off his coat, kicked off his canvas shoes, and, reaching the edge of the water, dived in head first without a word of explanation to the man and girl beside him.

He dived slantingly, and swam under water for a long way. When he came up he was a quarter of the distance across the inlet. He shook the water from his eyes, threw himself breast high out of the sea, and shouted:

"Has she come up? I don't see her!"

Nobody but Mary Cox knew what he meant.

Helen and the other girls were screaming because they had seen Tom fling himself into the sea · but they had not seen Ruth fall in.

Nor did Mary Cox find voice enough to tell them when they ran along the ledge to try and see what Tom was swimming for. The Fox stood with glaring eyes, trying to see into the deep pool. But the pool remain unruffled and Ruth did not rise to the surface.

"Has she come up?" again shouted Tom, rising as high as he could in the water, and swimming with an overhand stroke.

There seemed nobody to answer him; they did not know what he meant. The boy shot through the water like a fish. Coming near the rock, he rose up with a sudden muscular effort, then dived deep. The green water closed over him and, when Helen and the others reached the spot where Mary Cox stood, wringing her hands and moaning, Tom had disappeared as utterly as Ruth herself.

CHAPTER XVI

RUTH'S SECRET

"WHAT has happened?"

"Where's Ruth?"

"Mary Cox! why don't you answer?"

The Fox for once in her career was stunned. She could only shake her head and wring her hands. Helen was the first of the other girls to suspect the trouble, and she cried:

"Ruth's overboard! That's the reason Tom has gone in. Oh, oh! why don't they come up again?"

And almost immediately all the others saw the importance of that question. Ruth Fielding had been down fully a minute and a half now, and Tom had not come up once for air.

Nita had set off running around the head of the inlet, and Crab shuffled along in her wake. The strange girl ran like a goat over the rocks.

Phineas, who had been aboard the motor boat and busy with his famous culinary operations, now came lumbering up to the spot. He listened to a chorused explanation of the situation—tragic indeed in its appearance. Phineas looked up and

down the rocky path, and across the inlet, and seemed to swiftly take a marine "observation." Then he snorted.

"They're all right!" he exclaimed.

"*What?*" shrieked Helen.

"All right?" repeated Heavy. "Why, Phineas——"

She broke off with a startled gurgle. Phineas turned quickly, too, and looked over the high boulder. There appeared the head of Ruth Fielding and, in a moment, the head of Tom Cameron beside it.

"You both was swept through the tunnel into the pool behind, sir," said Phineas, wagging his head.

"Oh, I was never so scared in my life," murmured Ruth, clambering down to the path, the water running from her clothing in little streams.

"Me, too!" grunted Tom, panting. "The tide sets in through that hole awfully strong."

"I might have told you about it," grunted Phineas; "but I didn't suppose airy one of ye was going for to jump into the sea right here."

"We didn't—intentionally," declared Ruth.

"How ever did it happen, Ruthie?" demanded Heavy.

There was a moment's silence. Tom grew red in the face, but he kept his gaze turned from Mary Cox. Ruth answered calmly enough:

"It was my own fault. Mary was just coming along to pass me. I had a bite. Between trying to let her by and 'tending my fish,' I fell in—and now I have lost fish, line, and all."

"Be thankful you did not lose your life, Miss Fielding," said Aunt Kate. "Come right down to the boat and get those wet things off. You, too, Tom."

At that moment Nita came to the spot. "Is she safe? Is she safe?" she cried.

"Don't I look so?" returned Ruth, laughing gaily. "And here's the fish I *did* catch. I mustn't lose him."

Nita stepped close to the girl from the Red Mill and tugged at her wet sleeve.

"What are you going to do to her?" she whispered.

"Do to who?"

"That girl."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Ruth.

"I saw her," said Nita. "I saw her push you. She ought to be thrown into the water herself."

"Hush!" commanded Ruth. "You're mistaken. You didn't see straight, my dear."

"Yes, I did," declared the Western girl, firmly. "She's been mean to you, right along. I've noticed it. She threw you in."

"Don't say such a thing again!" commanded Ruth, warmly. "You have no right."

"Huh!" said Nita, eyeing her strangely. "It's your own business, I suppose. But I am not blind."

"I hope not," sad Ruth, calmly. "But I hope, too, you will not repeat what you just said—to anyone."

"Why—if you really don't want me to," said Nita, slowly.

"Truly, I don't wish you to," said Ruth, earnestly. "I don't even admit that you are right, mind——"

"Oh, it's your secret," said Nita, shortly, and turned away.

And Ruth had a word to say to Tom, too, as they hurried side by side to the boat, he carrying the fish. "Now, Tommy—remember!" she said.

"I won't be easy in my mind, just the same, while that girl is here," growled Master Tom.

"That's foolish. She never meant to do it."

"Huh! She was scared, of course. But she's mean enough——"

"Stop! somebody will hear you. And, anyway," Ruth added, remembering what Nita had said, "it's *my* secret."

"True enough; it is."

"Then don't tell it, Tommy," she added, with a laugh.

But it was hard to meet the sharp eye of Mercy Curtis and keep the secret. "And pray, Miss, why did you have to go into the water after the fish?" Mercy demanded.

"I was afraid he would get away," laughed Ruth.

"And who helped you do it?" snapped the lame girl.

"Helped me do what?"

"Helped you tumble in."

"Now, do you suppose I needed help to do so silly a thing as that?" cried Ruth.

"You needed help to do it the other day on the steamboat," returned Mercy, slily. "And I saw The Fox following you around that way."

"Why, what nonsense you talk, Mercy Curtis!"

But Ruth wondered if Mercy was to be so easily put off. The lame girl was so very sharp.

However, Ruth was determined to keep her secret. Not a word had she said to Mary Cox. Indeed, she had not looked at her since she climbed out of the open pool behind the boulder and, well-nigh breathless, reached the rock after that perilous plunge. Tom she had sworn to silence, Nita she had warned to be still, and now Mercy's suspicions were to be routed.

"Poor, poor girl!" muttered Ruth, with more sorrow than anger. "If she is not sorry and

afaid yet, how will she feel when she awakes in the night and remembers what might have been?"

Nevertheless, the girl from the Red Mill did not allow her secret to disturb her cheerfulness. She hid any feeling she might have had against The Fox. When they all met at dinner on the *Miraflame,* she merely laughed and joked about her accident, and passed around dainty bits of the baked tautog that Phineas had prepared especially for her.

That fisherman's chowder was a marvel, and altogether he proved to be as good a cook as Heavy had declared. The boys had caught several bass, and they caught more after dinner. But those were saved to take home. The girls, however, had had enough fishing. Ruth's experience frightened them away from the slippery rocks.

Mary Cox was certainly a very strange sort of a girl; but her present attitude did not surprise Ruth. Mary had, soon after Ruth entered Briarwood Hall, taken a dislike to the younger girl. Ruth's new club—the Sweetbriars—had drawn almost all the new girls in the school, as well as many of Mary's particular friends; while the Up and Doing Club, of which Mary was the leading spirit, was not alone frowned upon by Mrs. Tellingham and her assistants, but lost members until —as Helen Cameron had said—the last meeting

of the Upedes consisted of The Fox and Helen herself.

The former laid all this at Ruth Fielding's door. She saw Ruth's influence and her club increase, while her own friends fell away from her. Twice Ruth had helped to save Mary from drowning, and on neither occasion did the older girl seem in the least grateful. Now Ruth was saving her from the scorn of the other girls and —perhaps—a request from Heavy's Aunt Kate that Mary pack her bag and return home.

Ruth hoped that Mary would find some opportunity of speaking to her alone before the day was over. But, even when the boys returned from the outer rocks with a splendid string of bass, and the bow of the *Miraflame* was turned homeward, The Fox said never a word to her. Ruth crept away into the bows by herself, her mind much troubled. She feared that the fortnight at Lighthouse Point might become very unpleasant, if Mary continued to be so very disagreeable.

Suddenly somebody tapped her on the arm. The motor boat was pushing toward the mouth of Sokennet Harbor and the sun was well down toward the horizon. The girls were in the cabin, singing, and Madge was trying to make her brother sing, too; but Bob's voice was changing and what he did to the notes of the familiar tunes was a caution.

But it was Tom Cameron who had come to Ruth. "See here," said the boy, eagerly. "See what I picked up on the rocks over there."

"Over where?" asked Ruth, looking curiously at the folded paper in Tom's hand.

"Across from where you fell in, Ruth. Nita and that Crab fellow were standing there when I went down the rocks and dived in for you. And I saw them looking at this sheet of newspaper," and Tom began to slowly unfold it as he spoke.

CHAPTER XVII

WHAT WAS IN THE NEWSPAPER

"WHATEVER have you got there, Tom?" asked Ruth, curiously.

"Hush! I reckon Crab lost it when you fell in the water and stirred us all up so," returned the boy, with a grin.

"Lost that paper?"

"Yes. You see, it's a page torn from the Sunday edition of a New York daily. On this side is a story of some professor's discoveries in ancient Babylon."

"Couldn't have interested Jack Crab much," remarked Ruth, smiling.

"That's what I said myself," declared Tom, hastily. "Therefore, I turned it over. And *this* is what Crab was showing that Nita girl, I am sure."

Ruth looked at the illustrated sheet that Tom spread before her. There was a girl on a very spirited cow pony, swinging a lariat, the loop of which was about to settle over the broadly spreading horns of a Texas steer. The girl was dressed in a very fancy "cow-girl" costume, and

the picture was most spirited indeed. In one corner, too, was a reproduction of a photograph of the girl described in the newspaper article.

"Why! it doesn't look anything like Nita," gasped Ruth, understanding immediately why Tom had brought the paper to her.

"Nope. You needn't expect it to. Those papers use any old photograph to make illustrations from. But read the story."

It was all about the niece of a very rich cattle man in Montana who had run away from the ranch on which she had lived all her life. It was called Silver Ranch, and was a very noted cattle range in that part of the West. The girl's uncle raised both horses and cattle, was very wealthy, had given her what attention a single man could in such a situation, and was now having a country-wide search made for the runaway.

"Jane Ann Hicks Has Run Away From a Fortune" was the way the paper put it in a big "scare head" across the top of the page; and the text went on to tell of rough Bill Hicks, of Bullhide, and how he had begun in the early cattle days as a puncher himself and had now risen to the sole proprietorship of Silver Ranch.

"Bill's one possession besides his cattle and horses that he took any joy in was his younger brother's daughter, Jane Ann. She is an orphan and came to Bill and he has taken sole care of her

(for a woman has never been at Silver Ranch, save Indian squaws and a Mexican cook woman) since she could creep. Jane Ann is certainly the apple of Old Bill's eye.

"But, as Old Bill has told the Bullhide chief of police, who is sending the pictures and description of the lost girl all over the country, 'Jane Ann got some powerful hifalutin' notions.' She is now a well-grown girl, smart as a whip, pretty, afraid of nothing on four legs, and just as ignorant as a girl brought up in such an environment would be. Jane Ann has been reading novels, perhaps. As the Eastern youth used to fill up on cheap stories of the Far West, and start for that wild and woolly section with the intention of wiping from the face of Nature the last remnant of the Red Tribes, so it may be that Jane Ann Hicks has read of the Eastern millionaire and has started for the Atlantic seaboard for the purpose of lassoing one—or more—of those elusive creatures.

"However, Old Bill wants Jane Ann to come home. Silver Ranch will be hers some day, when Old Bill passes over the Great Divide, and he believes that if she is to be Montana's coming Cattle Queen his niece would better not know too much about the effete East."

And in this style the newspaper writer had spread before his readers a semi-humorous ac-

count (perhaps fictitious) of the daily life of the missing heiress of Silver Ranch, her rides over the prairies and hills on half-wild ponies, the round-ups, calf-brandings, horse-breakings, and all other activities supposed to be part and parcel of ranch life.

"My goodness me!" gasped Ruth, when she had hastily scanned all this, "do you suppose that any sane girl would have run away from all that for just a foolish whim?"

"Just what I say," returned Tom. "Cracky! wouldn't it be great to ride over that range, and help herd the cattle, and trail wild horses, and—and——"

"Well, that's just what one girl got sick of, it seems," finished Ruth, her eyes dancing. "Now! whether this same girl is the one we know——"

"I bet she is," declared Tom.

"Betting isn't proof, you know," returned Ruth, demurely.

"No. But Jane Ann Hicks is this young lady who wants to be called 'Nita'—Oh, glory! what a name!"

"If it is so," Ruth rejoined, slowly, "I don't so much wonder that she wanted a fancy name. 'Jane Ann Hicks'! It sounds ugly; but an ugly name can stand for a truly beautiful character."

"That fact doesn't appeal to this runaway girl,

I guess," said Tom. "But the question is: What shall we do about it?"

"I don't know as we can do anything about it," Ruth said, slowly. "Of course we don't know that this Hicks girl and Nita are the same."

"What was Crab showing her the paper for?"

"What can Crab have to do with it, anyway?" returned Ruth, although she had not forgotten the interest the assistant lighthouse keeper had shown in Nita from the first.

"Don't know. But if he recognized her——"

"From the picture?" asked Ruth.

"Well! you look at it. That drawing of the girl on horseback looks more like her than the photographic half-tone," said Tom. "She looks just that wild and harum-scarum!"

Ruth laughed. "There *is* a resemblance," she admitted. "But I don't understand why Crab should have any interest in the girl, anyway."

"Neither do I. Let's keep still about it. Of course, we'll tell Nell," said Tom. "But nobody else. If that old ranchman is her uncle he ought to be told where she is."

"Maybe she was not happy with him, after all," said Ruth, thoughtfully.

"My goodness!" Tom cried, preparing to go back to the other boys who were calling him. "I don't see how anybody could be unhappy under such conditions."

"That's all very well for a boy," returned the girl, with a superior air. "But think! she had no girls to associate with, and the only women were squaws and a Mexican cook!"

Ruth watched Nita, but did not see the assistant lighthouse keeper speak to the runaway during the passage home, and from the dock to the bungalow Ruth walked by Nita's side. She was tempted to show the page of the newspaper to the other girl, but hesitated. What if Nita really *was* Jane Hicks? Ruth asked herself how *she* would feel if she were burdened with that practical but unromantic name, and had to live on a lonely cattle ranch without a girl to speak to.

"Maybe I'd run away myself," thought Ruth. "I was almost tempted to run away from Uncle Jabez when I first went to live at the Red Mill."

She had come to pity the strange girl since reading about the one who had run away from Silver Ranch. Whether Nita had any connection with the newspaper article or not, Ruth had begun to see that there might be situations which a girl couldn't stand another hour, and from which she was fairly forced to flee.

The fishing party arrived home in a very gay mood, despite the incident of Ruth's involuntary bath. Mary Cox kept away from the victim of the accident and when the others chaffed Ruth,

and asked her how she came to topple over the rock, The Fox did not even change color.

Tom scolded in secret to Ruth about Mary. "She ought to be sent home. I'll not feel that you're safe any time she is in your company. I've a mind to tell Miss Kate Stone," he said.

"I'll be dreadfully angry if you do such a thing, Tom," Ruth assured him, and that promise was sufficient to keep the boy quiet.

They were all tired and not even Helen objected when bed was proposed that night. In fact, Heavy went to sleep in her chair, and they had a dreadful time waking her up and keeping her awake long enough for her to undress, say her prayers, and get into bed.

In the other girls' room Ruth and her companions spent little time in talking or frolicking. Nita had begged to sleep with Mercy, with whom she had spent considerable time that day and evening; and the lame girl and the runaway were apparently both asleep before Ruth and Helen got settled for the night.

Then Helen dropped asleep between yawns and Ruth found herself lying wide-awake, staring at the faintly illuminated ceiling. Of a sudden, sleep had fled from her eyelids. The happenings of the day, the mystery of Nita, the meanness of Mary Cox, her own trouble at the mill, the impossibility of her going to Briarwood

next term unless she found some way of raising money for her tuition and board, and many, many other thoughts, trooped through Ruth Fielding's mind for more than an hour.

Mostly the troublesome thoughts were of her poverty and the seeming impossibility of her ever discovering any way to earn such a quantity of money as three hundred and fifty dollars. Her chum, lying asleep beside her, did not dream of this problem that continually troubled Ruth's mind.

The clock down stairs tolled eleven solemn strokes. Ruth did not move. She might have been sound asleep, save for her open eyes, their gaze fixed upon the ceiling. Suddenly a beam of light flashed in at one window, swinging from right to left, like the blade of a phantom scythe, and back again.

Ruth did not move, but the beam of light took her attention immediately from her former thoughts. Again and once again the flash of light was repeated. Then she suddenly realized what it was. Somebody was walking down the path toward the private dock, swinging a lantern.

She would have given it no further thought had not a door latch clicked. Whether it was the latch of her room, or another of the bedrooms on this floor of the bungalow, Ruth could not tell,

But in a moment she heard the balustrade of the stair creak.

"It's Izzy again!" thought Ruth, sitting up in bed. "He's walking in his sleep. The boys did not tie him."

She crept out of bed softly so as not to awaken Helen or the other girls and went to the door. When she opened it and peered out, there was no ghostly figure "tight-roping it" on the balustrade. But she heard a sound below—in the lower hall. Somebody was fumbling with the chain of the front door.

"He's going out! I declare, he's going out!" thought Ruth and sped to the window.

She heard the jar of the big front door as it was opened, and then pulled shut again. She heard no step on the porch, but a figure soon fluttered down the steps. It was not Isadore Phelps, however. Ruth knew that at first glance. Indeed, it was not a boy who started away from the house, running on the grass beside the graveled walk.

Ruth turned back hastily and looked at the other bed—at Mercy's bed. The place beside the lame girl was empty. Nita had disappeared!

CHAPTER XVIII

ANOTHER NIGHT ADVENTURE

RUTH was startled, to say the least, by the discovery that Nita was absent. And how softly the runaway girl must have crept out of bed and out of the room for Ruth—who had been awake—not to hear her!

"She certainly is a sly little thing!" gasped Ruth.

But as she turned back to see what had become of the figure running beside the path, the lantern light was flashed into her eyes. Again the beam was shot through the window and danced for a moment on the wall and ceiling.

"It is a signal!" thought Ruth. "There's somebody outside besides Nita—somebody who wishes to communicate with her."

Even as she realized this she saw the lantern flash from the dock. That was where it had been all the time. It was a dark-lantern, and its ray had been intentionally shot into the window of their room.

The figure she had seen steal away from the bungalow had now disappeared. If it was Nita

—as Ruth believed—the strange girl might be hiding in the shadow of the boathouse.

However, the girl from the Red Mill did not stand idly at the window for long. It came to her that somebody ought to know what was going on. Her first thought was that Nita was bent on running away from her new friends—although, as as far as any restraint was put upon her, she might have walked away at any time.

"But she ought not to go off like this," thought Ruth, hurrying into her own garments. By the faint light that came from outside she could see to dress; and she saw, too, that Nita's clothing had disappeared.

"Why, the girl must have dressed," thought Ruth, in wonder. "How could she have done it with me lying here awake?"

Meanwhile, her own fingers were busy and in two minutes from the time she had turned from the window, she opened the hall door again and tiptoed out.

The house was perfectly still, save for the ticking of the big clock. She sped down the stairway, and as she passed the glimmering face of the time-keeper she glanced at it and saw that the minute hand was just eight minutes past the hour.

In a closet under the stairs were the girls' outside garments, and hats. She found somebody's tam-o'-shanter and her own sweater-coat, and

slipped both on in a hurry. When she opened the door the chill, salt air, with not a little fog in it, breathed into the close hall.

She stepped out, pulled the door to and latched it, and crossed the porch. The harbor seemed deserted. Two or three night lights sparkled over on the village side. What vessels rode at anchor showed no lights at their moorings. But the great, steady, yellow light of the beacon on the point shone steadily—a wonderfully comforting sight, Ruth thought, at this hour of the night.

There were no more flashes of lantern light from the dock. Nor did she hear a sound from that direction as she passed out through the trimly cut privet hedge and took the shell walk to the boathouse. She was in canvas shoes and her step made no sound. In a moment or two she was in the shadow again.

Then she heard voices—soft, but earnest tones—and knew that two people were talking out there toward the end of the dock. One was a deep voice; the other might be Nita's—at least, it was a feminine voice.

"Who under the sun can she have come here to meet?" wondered Ruth, anxiously. "Not one of the boys. This can't be merely a lark of some kind——"

Something scraped and squeaked—a sound that shattered the silence of the late evening com-

pletely. A dog instantly barked back of the the bungalow, in the kennels. Other dogs on the far shore of the cove replied. A sleep-walking rooster began to crow clamorously, believing that it was already growing day.

The creaking stopped in a minute, and Ruth heard a faint splash. The voices had ceased.

"What can it mean?" thought the anxious girl. She could remain idle there behind the boathouse no longer. She crept forth upon the dock to reconnoiter. There seemed to be nobody there.

And then, suddenly, she saw that the catboat belonging to Mr. Stone's little fleet—the *Jennie S.*' it was called, named for Heavy herself—was some distance from her moorings.

The breeze was very light; but the sail was raised and had filled, and the catboat was drifting quite rapidly out beyond the end of the dock. It was so dark in the cockpit that Ruth could not distinguish whether there were one or two figures aboard, or who they were; but she realized that somebody was off on a midnight cruise.

"And without saying a word about it!" gasped Ruth. "Could it be, after all, one of the boys and Nita? Are they doing this just for the fun of it?"

Yet the heavy voice she had heard did not sound like that of either of the three boys at the bungalow. Not even Bob Steele, when his un-

fortunate voice was pitched in its very lowest key, could rumble like this voice.

The girl of the Red Mill was both troubled and frightened. Suppose Nita and her companion should be wrecked in the catboat? She did not believe that the runaway girl knew anything about working a sailboat. And who was her companion on this midnight escapade? Was he one of the longshoremen?

Suddenly she thought of Jack Crab. But Crab was supposed to be at the lighthouse at this hour; wasn't he? She could not remember what she had heard about the lighthouse keeper's assistant.

Nor could Ruth decide at once whether to go back to the house and give the alarm, or not. Had she known where Phineas, the boatkeeper, lodged, she would certainly have tried to awaken him. He ought to be told that one of the boats was being used—and, of course, without permission.

The sail of the catboat drifted out of sight while she stood there undecided. She could not pursue the *Jennie S.* Had she known where Phineas was, they might have gone after the catboat in the *Miraflame;* but otherwise Ruth saw no possibility of tracking the two people who had borrowed the *Jennie S.*

Nor was she sure that it was desirable to go in,

awaken the household, and report the disappearance of Nita. The cruise by night might be a very innocent affair.

"And then again," murmured Ruth, "there may be something in it deeper than I can see. We do not really know who this Nita is. That piece in the paper may not refer to her at all. Suppose, instead of having run away from a rich uncle and a big cattle ranch, Nita comes from bad people? Mrs. Kirby and the captain knew nothing about her. It may be that some of Nita's bad friends have followed her here, and they may mean to rob the Stones!

"Goodness! that's a very bad thought," muttered Ruth, shaking her head. "I ought not to suspect the girl of anything like that. Although she is so secret, and so rough of speech, she doesn't seem to be a girl who has lived with really bad people."

Ruth could not satisfy herself that it would be either right or wise to go in and awaken Miss Kate, or even the butler. But she could not bring herself to the point of going to bed, either, while Nita was out on the water.

She couldn't think of sleep, anyway. Not until the catboat came back to the dock did she move out of the shadow of the boathouse. And it was long past one o'clock when this occurred. The breeze had freshened, and the *Jennie S.* had to

tack several times before the boatman made the moorings.

The starlight gave such slight illumination that Ruth could not see who was in the boat. The sail was dropped, the boat moored, and then, after a bit, she heard a heavy step upon the dock. Only one person came toward her.

Ruth peered anxiously out of the shadow. A man slouched along the dock and reached the shell road. He turned east, moving away toward the lighthouse. It was Jack Crab.

"And Nita is not with him!" gasped Ruth. "What has he done with her? Where has he taken her in the boat? What does it mean?"

She dared not run after Crab and ask him. She was really afraid of the man. His secret communication with Nita was no matter to be blurted out to everybody, she was sure. Nita had gone to meet him of her own free will. She was not obliged to sail away with Crab in the catboat. Naturally, the supposition was that she had decided to remain away from the bungalow of her own intention, too.

"It is not my secret," thought Ruth. "She was merely a visitor here. Miss Kate, even, had no command over her actions. She is not responsible for Nita—none of us is responsible.

"I only hope she won't get into any trouble through that horrid Jack Crab. And it seems so

ungrateful for Nita to walk out of the house without saying a word to Heavy and Miss Kate.

"I'd best keep my own mouth shut, however, and let things take their course. Nita wanted to go away, or she would not have done so. She seemed to have no fear of Jack Crab; otherwise she would not have met him at night and gone away with him.

"Ruth Fielding! you mind your own business," argued the girl of the Red Mill, finally going back toward the silent house. "At least, wait until we see what comes of this before you tell everything you know."

And so deciding, she crept into the house, locked the door again, got into her room without disturbing any of the other girls, and so to bed and finally to sleep, being little the wiser for her midnight escapade.

CHAPTER XIX

THE GOBLINS' GAMBOL

HELEN awoke Ruth in the morning with the question that was bound to echo and re-echo through the bungalow for that, and subsequent days:

"Where is Nita?"

Ruth could truthfully answer: "I do not know."

Nor did anybody else know, or suspect, or imagine. What had happened in the night was known only to Ruth and she had determined not to say a word concerning it unless she should be pointedly examined by Miss Kate, or somebody else in authority.

Nobody else had heard or seen Nita leave the bungalow. Indeed, nobody had heard Ruth get up and go out, either. The catboat rocked at its moorings, and there was no trace of how Nita had departed.

As to *why* she had gone so secretly—well, that was another matter. They were all of the opinion that the runaway was a very strange girl. She had gone without thanking Miss Kate or

Heavy for their entertainment. She was evidently an ungrateful girl.

These opinions were expressed by the bulk of the party at the bungalow. But Ruth and Helen and the latter's brother had their own secret about the runaway. Helen had been shown the paper Tom had found. She and Tom were convinced that Nita was really Jane Ann Hicks and that she had been frightened away by Jack Crab. Crab maybe had threatened her.

On this point Ruth could not agree. But she could not explain her reason for doubting it without telling more than she wished to tell; therefore she did not insist upon her own opinion.

In secret she read over again the article in the newspaper about the lost Jane Ann Hicks. Something she had not noticed before now came under her eye. It was at the end of the article—at the bottom of the last column on the page:

"Old Bill certainly means to find Jane Ann if he can. He has told Chief Penhampton, of Bullhide, to spare no expense. The old man says he'll give ten good steers—or five hundred dollars in hard money—for information leading to the apprehension and return of Jane Ann. And he thinks some of starting for the East himself to hunt her up if he doesn't hear soon."

"That poor old man," thought Ruth, "really loves his niece. If I was sure Nita was the girl

told of here, I'd be tempted to write to Mr. Hicks myself."

But there was altogether too much to do at Lighthouse Point for the young folks to spend much time worrying about Nita. Phineas said that soft-shell crabs were to be found in abundance at the mouth of the creek at the head of the cove, and that morning the boys made nets for all hands —at least, they found the poles and fastened the hoops to them, while the girls made the bags of strong netting—and after dinner the whole party trooped away (Mercy excepted) to heckle the crabs under the stones and snags where Phineas declared they would be plentiful.

The girls were a bit afraid of the creatures at first, when they were shaken out of the scoops; but they soon found that the poor things couldn't bite until the new shells hardened. The boys took off their shoes and stockings and waded in, whereupon Bob suddenly began to dance and bawl and splash the water all over himself and his companions.

"What under the sun's the matter with you, Bobbins?" roared Tom, backing away from his friend to escape a shower-bath.

"Oh! he's got a fit!" squealed Isadore.

"It's cramps!" declared Heavy, from the shore, and in great commiseration.

"For pity's sake, little boy!" cried Bob's sis-

ter, "what is the matter with you now? He's the greatest child! always getting into some mess."

Bob continued to dance; but he got into shoal water after a bit and there it was seen that he was doing a sort of Highland fling on one foot. The other had attached to it a big hard-shell crab; and no mortgage was ever clamped upon a poor man's farm any tighter than Mr. Crab was fastened upon Bob's great toe.

"Ooh! Ooh! Ooh!" repeated the big fellow, whacking away at the crab with the handle of his net.

Isadore tried to aid him, and instead of hitting the crab with *his* stick, barked Bob's ankle bone nicely.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" yelled the youth in an entirely different key.

The girls were convulsed with laughter; but Tom got the big crab and the big boy apart. Bob wasn't satisfied until he had placed the hardshell between two stones and wrecked it—smashed it flat as a pancake.

"There! I know that fellow will never nip another inoffensive citizen," groaned Bob, and he sat on a stone and nursed his big toe and his bruised ankle until the others were ready to go home.

They got a nice mess of crabs; but Bob refused

to eat any. "Never want to see even crabs *a la* Newburgh again," he grunted. "And I don't believe that even a fried soft-shell crab is dead enough so that it can't bite a fellow!"

There was a splendid smooth bit of beach beyond the dock where they bathed, and even Mercy had taken a dip that morning; but when the girls went to their bedrooms at night each girl found pinned to her nightdress a slip of paper —evidently a carbon copy of a typewritten message. It read:

"THE GOBLINS' GAMBOL—You are instructed to put on your bathing suit, take a wrap, and meet for a Goblins' Gambol on the beach at ten sharp. The tide will be just right, and there is a small moon. Do not fail."

The girls giggled a good deal over this. They all declared they had not written the message, or caused it to be written. There was a typewriter downstairs, Heavy admitted; but she had never used it. Anyhow, the suggestion was too tempting to refuse.

At ten the girls, shrouded in their cloaks and water proofs, crept down stairs and out of the house. The door was locked, and they could not imagine who had originated this lark. The boys did not seem to be astir at all.

"If Aunt Kate hears of this I expect she'll say something," chuckled Heavy. "But we've been pretty good so far. Oh, it is just warm and nice. I bet the water will be fine."

They trooped down to the beach, Mercy limping along with the rest. Ruth and Helen gave her aid when she reached the sand, for her crutches hampered her there.

"Come on! the water's fine!" cried Madge, running straight into the smooth sea.

They were soon sporting in it, and having a great time, but keeping near the shore because the boys were not there, when suddenly Helen began to squeal—and then Madge. Those two likewise instantly disappeared beneath the water, their cries ending in articulate gurgles.

"Oh! Oh!" cried Heavy. "There's somebody here! Something's got me!"

She was in shallow water, and she promptly sat down. Whatever had grabbed her vented a mighty grunt, for she pinioned it for half a minute under her weight. When she could scramble up she had to rescue what she had fallen on, and it proved to be Isadore—very limp and "done up."

"It's the boys," squealed Helen, coming to the surface. "Tom swam under water and caught me."

"And this is that horrid Bob!" cried Madge. "What have you got there, Heavy?"

"I really don't know," giggled the stout girl. "What do you think it looks like?"

"My—goodness—me!" panted Busy Izzy. "I thought—it—it was Ruth! Why—why don't you look where you're sitting, Jennie Stone?"

But the laugh was on Isadore and he could not turn the tables. The boys had been out to the diving float watching the girls come in. And in a minute or two Miss Kate joined them, too. It was she who had planned the moonlight dip and for half an hour they ran races on the sand, and swam, and danced, and had all sorts of queer larks.

Miss Kate was about to call them out and "shoo" the whole brood into the house again when they heard a horse, driven at high speed, coming over the creek bridge.

"Hullo! here comes somebody in a hurry," said Tom.

"That's right. He's driving this way, not toward the railroad station," rejoined Heavy. "It's somebody from Sokennet."

"Who can it be this time of night?" was her aunt's question as they waited before the gateway as the carriage wheeled closer.

"There's a telegraph office, you know, at Sokennet," said Heavy, thoughtfully. "And—yes! —that's Brickman's old horse. Hullo!"

"Whoa! Hullo, Miss!" exclaimed a hoarse

voice. "Glad I found you up. Here's a message for you."

"For me?" cried Heavy, and dripping as she was, ran out to the carriage .

"Sign on this place, Miss. Here's a pencil. Thank you, Miss; it's paid for. That's the message," and he put a telegraph envelope into her hand.

On the outside of the envelope was written, "Stone, Lighthouse Point." Under the lamp on the porch Heavy broke the seal and drew out the message, while the whole party stood waiting. She read it once to herself, and was evidently immensely surprised. Then she read it out loud, and her friends were just as surprised as she was:

"Stone, Lighthouse Point, Sokennet.—Hold onto her. I am coming right down.

"W. Hicks."

CHAPTER XX

"WHAR'S MY JANE ANN?"

THREE of Heavy's listeners knew in an instant what the telegram meant—who it was from, and who was mentioned in it—Ruth, Helen and Tom. But how, or why the telegram had been sent was as great a mystery to them as to the others; therefore their surprise was quite as unfeigned as that of the remaining girls and boys.

"Why, somebody's made a mistake," said Heavy. "Such a telegram couldn't be meant for me."

"And addressed only to 'Stone,' said her aunt. "It is, of course, a mistake."

"And who are we to hold on to?" laughed Mary Cox, prepared to run into the house again.

"Wait!" cried Mercy, who had come leaning upon Madge's arm from the shore. "Don't you see who that message refers to?"

"No!" they chorused.

"To that runaway girl, of course," said the cripple. "That's plain enough, I hope."

"To Nita!" gasped Heavy.

"But who is it that's coming here for her?

And how did 'W. Hicks' know she was here?" demanded Ruth.

"Maybe Captain and Mrs. Kirby told all about her when they got to Boston. News of her, and where she was staying, got to her friends," said Mercy Curtis. "That's the 'why and wherefore' of it—believe me!"

"That sounds very reasonable," admitted Aunt Kate. "The Kirbys would only know our last name and would not know how to properly address either Jennie or me. Come, now! get in on the rubber mats in your rooms and rub down well. The suits will be collected and rinsed out and hung to dry before Mammy Laura goes to bed. If any of you feel the least chill, let me know."

But it was so warm and delightful a night that there was no danger of colds. The girls were so excited by the telegram and had so much to say about the mystery of Nita, the castaway, that it was midnight before any of them were asleep.

However, they had figured out that the writer of the telegram, leaving New York, from which it was sent at half after eight, would be able to take a train that would bring him to Sandtown very early in the morning; and so the excited young folks were all awake by five o'clock.

It was a hazy morning, but there was a good breeze from the land. Tom declared he heard

the train whistle for the Sandtown station, and everybody dressed in a hurry, believing that "W. Hicks" would soon be at the bungalow.

There were no public carriages at the station to meet that early train, and Miss Kate had doubted about sending anybody to meet the person who had telegraphed. In something like an hour, however, they saw a tall man, all in black, striding along the sandy road toward the house.

As he came nearer he was seen to be a big-boned man, with broad shoulders, long arms, and a huge reddish mustache, the ends of which drooped almost to his collar. Such a mustache none of them had ever seen before. His black clothes would have fitted a man who weighed a good fifty pounds more than he did, and so the garments hung baggily upon him. He wore a huge, black slouched hat, with immensely broad brim.

He strode immediately to the back door—that being the nearest to the road by which he came—and the boys and girls in the breakfast room crowded to the windows to see him. He looked neither to right nor left, however, but walked right into the kitchen, where they at once heard a thunderous voice demand:

"Whar's my Jane Ann? Whar's my Jane Ann, I say?"

Mammy Laura evidently took his appearance

and demand in no good part. She began to sputter, but his heavy voice rode over hers and quenched it:

"Keep still, ol' woman! I want to see your betters. Whar's my Jane Ann?"

"Lawsy massy! what kine ob a man is yo'?" squealed the fat old colored woman. "T' come combustucatin' inter a pusson's kitchen in disher way——"

"Be still, ol' woman!" roared the visito again. "Whar's my Jane Ann?"

The butler appeared then and took the strange visitor in hand.

"Come this way, sir. Miss Kate will see you," he said, and led the big man into the front of the house.

"I don't want none o' your 'Miss Kates,'" growled the stranger. "I want my Jane Ann."

Heavy's little Aunt looked very dainty indeed when she appeared before this gigantic Westerner. The moment he saw her, off came his big hat, displaying a red, freckled face, and a head as bald as an egg. He was a very ugly man, saving when he smiled; then innumerable humorous wrinkles appeared about his eyes and the pale blue eyes themselves twinkled confidingly.

"Your sarvent, ma'am," he said. "Your name Stone?"

"It is, sir. I presume you are 'W. Hicks'?" she said.

"That's me—Bill Hicks. Bill Hicks, of Bullhide, Montanny."

"I hope you have not come here, Mr. Hicks, to be disappointed. But I must tell you at the start," said Miss Kate, "that I never heard of you before I received your very remarkable telegram."

"Huh! that can well be, ma'am—that can well be. But they got your letter at the ranch, and Jib, he took it into Colonel Penhampton, and the Colonel telegraphed me to New York, where I'd come a-hunting her——"

"Wait, wait, wait!" cried Miss Kate, eagerly. "I don't understand at all what you are talking about."

"Why—why, I'm aimin' to talk about my Jane Ann," exclaimed the cattle man.

"Jane Ann who?" she gasped.

"Jane Ann Hicks. My little gal what you've got her and what you wrote about——"

"You are misinformed, sir," declared Miss Kate. "I have never written to you—or to anybody else—about any person named Jane Ann Hicks."

"Oh, mebbe you don't know her by that name. She had some hifalutin' idee before she vamoosed about not likin' her name—an' I give her that thar name myself!" added Bill Hicks, in an aggrieved tone.

"Nor have I written about any other little girl,

or by any other name," rejoined Miss Kate. "I have written no letter at all."

"You didn't write to Silver Ranch to tell us that my little Jane Ann was found?" gasped the man.

"No, sir."

"Somebody else wrote, then?"

"I do not know it, if they did," Miss Kate declared.

"Then somebody's been a-stringin' of me?" he roared, punching his big hat with a clenched, freckled fist in a way that made Miss Kate jump.

"Oh!" she cried.

"Don't you be afeared, ma'am," said the big man, more gently. "But I'm mighty cast down —I sure am! Some miser'ble coyote has fooled me. That letter said as how my little niece was wrecked on a boat here and that a party named Stone had taken her into their house at Lighthouse Point——"

"It's Nita!" cried Miss Kate.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"You're speaking of Nita, the castaway!"

"I'm talkin' of my niece, Jane Ann Hicks," declared the rancher. "That's who I'm talking of."

"But she called herself Nita, and would not tell us anything about herself."

"It might be, ma'am. The little skeezicks!" chuckled the Westerner, his eyes twinkling sud-

denly. "That's a mighty fancy name—'Nita.' And so she *is* here with you, after all?"

"No."

"Not here?" he exclaimed, his big, bony face reddening again.

"No, sir. I believe she has been here—your niece."

"And where'd she go? What you done with her?" he demanded, his overhanging reddish eyebrows coming together in a threatening scowl.

"Hadn't you better sit down, Mr. Hicks, and let me tell you all about it?" suggested Miss Kate.

"Say, Miss!" he ejaculated. "I'm anxious, I be. When Jane Ann first run away from Silver Ranch, I thought she was just a-playin' off some of her tricks on me. I never supposed she was in earnest 'bout it—no, ma'am!

"I rid into Bullhide arter two days. And instead of findin' her knockin' around there, I finds her pony at the greaser's corral, and learns that she's took the train East. That did beat me. I didn't know she had any money, but she'd bought a ticket to Denver, and it took a right smart of money to do it.

"I went to Colonel Penhampton, I did," went on Hicks, "and told him about it. He heated up the wires some 'twixt Bullhide and Denver; but

she'd fell out o' sight there the minute she'd landed. Denver's some city, ma'am. I finds that out when I lit out arter Jane Ann and struck that place myself.

"Wal! 'twould be teejious to you, ma'am, if I told whar I have chased arter that gal these endurin' two months. Had to let the ranch an' ev'rythin' else go to loose ends while I follered news of her all over. My gosh, ma'am! how many gals there is runs away from their homes! Ye wouldn't believe the number 'nless ye was huntin' for a pertic'lar one an' got yer rope on so many that warn't her!"

"You have had many disappointments, sir?" said Miss Kate, beginning to feel a great sympathy for this uncouth man.

He nodded his great, bald, shining head. "I hope you ain't going to tell me thar's another in store for me right yere," he said, in a much milder voice.

"I cannot tell you where Nita—if she is your niece—is now," said Miss Kate, firmly.

"She's left you?"

"She went away some time during the night—night before last."

"What for?" he asked, suspiciously.

"I don't know. We none of us knew. We made her welcome and said nothing about sending her away, or looking for her friends. I did

not wish to frighten her away, for she is a strangely independent girl——"

"You bet she is!" declared Mr. Hicks, emphatically.

"I hoped she would gradually become confiding, and then we could really do something for her. But when we got up yesterday morning she had stolen out of the house in the night and was gone."

"And ye don't know whar Jane Ann went?" he said, with a sort of groan.

Miss Kate shook her head; but suddenly a voice interrupted them. Ruth Fielding parted the curtains and came into the room.

"I hope you will pardon me, Miss Kate," she said softly,. "And this gentleman, too. I believe I can tell him how Nita went away—and perhaps through what I know he may be able to find her again."

CHAPTER XXI

CRAB MAKES HIS DEMAND

Bill Hicks beckoned the girl from the Red Mill forward. "You come right here, Miss," he said, "and let's hear all about it. I'm a-honin' for my Jane Ann somethin' awful—ye don't know what a loss she is to me. And Silver Ranch don't seem the same no more since she went away."

"Tell me," said Ruth, curiously, as she came forward, "was what the paper said about it all true?"

"Why, Ruth, what paper is this? What do you know about this matter that I don't know?" cried Miss Kate.

"I'm sorry, Miss Kate," said the girl; "but it wasn't my secret and I didn't feel I could tell you——"

"I know what you mean, little Miss," Hicks interrupted. "That New York newspaper—with the picter of Jane Ann on a pony what looked like one o' these horsecar horses? Most ev'rythin' they said in that paper was true about her—and the ranch."

"And she has had to live out there without any decent woman, and no girls to play with, and all that?"

"Wal!" exclaimed Mr. Hicks. "That ain't sech a great crime; is it?"

"I don't wonder so much she ran away," Ruth said, softly. "But I am sorry she did not stay here until you came, sir."

"But where is she?" chorused both the ranchman and Miss Kate, and the latter added: "Tell what you know about her departure, Ruth."

So Ruth repeated all that she had heard and seen on the night Nita disappeared from the Stone bungalow.

"And this man, Crab, can be found down yonder at the lighthouse?" demanded the ranchman, rising at the end of Ruth's story.

"He is there part of the time, sir," Miss Kate said. "He is a rather notorious character around here—a man of bad temper, I believe. Perhaps you had better go to the authorities first——"

"What authorities?" demanded the Westerner in surprise.

"The Sokennet police."

Bill Hicks snorted. "I don't need police in this case, ma'am," he said. "I know what to do with this here Crab when I find him. And if harm's come to my Jane Ann, so much the worse for him."

"Oh, I hope you will be patient, sir," said Miss Kate.

"Nita was not a bit afraid of him, I am

sure," Ruth hastened to add. "He would not hurt her."

"No. I reckon he wants to make money out of me," grunted Bill Hicks, who did not lack shrewdness. "He sent the letter that told me she was here, and then he decoyed her away somewhere so's to hold her till I came and paid him the reward. Wal! let me git my Jane Ann back, safe and sound, and he's welcome to the five hundred dollars I offered for news of her."

"But first, Mr. Hicks," said Miss Kate, rising briskly, "you'll come to breakfast. You have been traveling all night——"

"That's right, ma'am. No chance for more than a peck at a railroad sandwich—tough critters, them!"

"Ah! here is Tom Cameron," she said, having parted the portieres and found Tom just passing through the hall. "Mr. Hicks, Tom. Nita's uncle."

"Er—Mr. Bill Hicks, of the Silver Ranch!" ejaculated Tom.

"So you've hearn tell of me, too, have you, younker?" quoth the ranchman, good-naturedly. "Well, my fame's spreadin'."

"And it seems that *I* am the only person here who did not know all about your niece," said Miss Kate Stone, drily.

"Oh, no, ma'am!" cried Tom. "It was only

Ruth and Helen and I who knew anything about it. And we only suspected. You see, we found the newspaper article which told about that bully ranch, and the fun that girl had——"

"Jane Ann didn't think 'twas nice enough for her," grunted the ranchman. "She wanted high-heeled slippers—and shift—shift-on hats—and a pianner! Common things warn't good enough for Jane Ann."

Ruth laughed, for she wasn't at all afraid of the big Westerner. "If chiffon hats and French heeled slippers would have kept Nita—I mean, Jane Ann—at home, wouldn't it have been cheaper for you to have bought 'em?" she asked.

"It shore would!" declared the cattleman, emphatically. "But when the little girl threatened to run away I didn't think she meant it."

Meanwhile Miss Kate had asked Tom to take the big man up stairs where he could remove the marks of travel. In half an hour he was at the table putting away a breakfast that made even Mammy Laura open her eyes in wonder.

"I'm a heavy feeder, Miss," he said apologetically, to Ruth. "Since I been East I often have taken my breakfast in two restaurants, them air waiters stare so. I git it in relays, as ye might say. Them restaurant people ain't used to seeing a *man* eat. And great cats! how they do charge for vittles!"

But ugly as he was, and big and rude as he was, there was a simplicity and open-heartedness about Mr. Hicks that attracted more than Ruth Fielding. The boys, because Tom was enthusiastic about the old fellow, came in first. But the girls were not far behind, and by the time Mr. Hicks had finished breakfast the whole party was in the room, listening to his talk of his lost niece, and stories of Silver Ranch and the growing and wonderful West.

Mercy Curtis, who had a sharp tongue and a sharper insight into character, knew just how to draw Bill Hicks out. And the ranchman, as soon as he understood that Mercy was a cripple, paid her the most gallant attentions. And he took the lame girl's sharp criticisms in good part, too.

"So you thought you could bring up a girl baby from the time she could crawl till she was old enough to get married—eh?" demanded Mercy, in her whimsical way. "What a smart man you are, Mr. Bill Hicks!"

"Ya-as—ain't I?" he groaned. "I see now I didn't know nothin'."

"Not a living thing!" agreed Mercy. "Bringing up a girl among a lot of cow—cow—what do you call 'em?"

"Punchers," he finished, wagging his head.

"That's it. Nice society for a girl Likely to make her ladylike and real happy, too."

"Great cats!" ejaculated the ranchman, "I thought I was doin' the square thing by Jane Ann——"

"And giving her a name like that, too!" broke in Mercy. "How dared you?"

"Why—why——" stammered Mr. Hicks. "It was my grandmother's name—and she was as spry a woman as ever I see."

"Your grandmother's name!" gasped Mercy. "Then, what right had you to give it to your niece? And when she was a helpless baby, too! Wasn't she good enough to have a name of her own—and one a little more modern?"

"Miss, you stump me—you sure do!" declared Mr. Hicks, with a sigh. "I never thought a gal cared so much for them sort o' things. They're surprisin' different from boys; ain't they?"

"Hope you haven't found it out too late, Mister Wild and Woolly," said Mercy, biting her speech off in her sharp way. "You had better take a fashion magazine and buy Nita—or whatever she wants to call herself—clothes and hats like other girls wear. Maybe you'll be able to keep her on a ranch, then."

"Wal, Miss! I'm bound to believe you've got the rights of it. I ain't never had much knowledge of women-folks, and that's a fact——"

He was interrupted by the maid coming to the

door. "There's a boy here, Miss Kate," she said, "who is asking for the gentleman."

"Asking for the gentleman?" repeated Miss Kate.

"Yes, ma'am. The gentleman who has just come. The gentleman from the West."

"Axing for *me?*" cried the ranchman, getting up quickly.

"It must be for you, sir," said Aunt Kate. "Let the boy come in, Sally."

In a minute a shuffling, tow-headed, bare-footed lad of ten years or so entered bashfully. He was a son of one of the fishermen living along the Sokennet shore.

"You wanter see me, son?" demanded the Westerner. "Bill Hicks, of Bullhide?"

"Dunno wot yer name is, Mister," said the boy. "But air you lookin' for a gal that was brought ashore from the wreck of that lumber schooner?"

"That's me!" cried Mr. Hicks.

"Then I got suthin' for ye," said the boy, and thrust a soiled envelope toward him. "Jack Crab give it to me last night. He said I was to come over this morning an' wait for you to come. Phin says you had come, w'en I got here. That's all."

"Hold on!" cried Tom Cameron, as the boy started to go out, and Mr. Hicks ripped open

the envelope. "Say, where is this Crab man?"

"Dunno."

"Where did he go after giving you the note?"

"Dunno."

Just then Mr. Hicks uttered an exclamation that drew all attention to him and the fisherman's boy slipped out.

"Great cats!" roared Bill Micks. "Listen to this, folks! What d'ye make of it?

"'Now I got you right. Whoever you be, you are wanting to get hold of the girl. I know where she is. You won't never know unless I get that five hundred dols. the paper talked about. You leave it at the lighthouse. Mis Purling will take care of it and I reckon on getting it from her when I want it. When she has got the five hundred dols. I will let you know how to find the girl. So, no more at present, from

"'J. CRAB.'

"Listen here to it, will ye? Why, if once I get my paws on this here Crab——"

"You want to get the girl most; don't you?" interrupted Mercy, sharply.

"Of course!"

"Then you'd better see if paying the money to him—just as he says—won't bring her to you. You offered the reward, you know."

"But maybe he doesn't really know anything about Nita!" cried Heavy.

"And maybe he knows just where she is," said Ruth.

"Wal! he seems like a mighty sharp feller," admitted the cattleman, seriously. "I want my Jane Ann back. I don't begredge no five hundred dollars. I'm a-goin' over to that lighthouse and see what this Missus Purling—you say she's the keeper?—knows about it. That's what I'm going to do!" finished Hicks with emphasis.

CHAPTER XXII

THIMBLE ISLAND

Miss Kate said of course he could use the buckboard and ponies, and it was the ranchman's own choice that the young folks went, too. There was another wagon, and they could all crowd aboard one or the other vehicle—even Mercy Curtis went.

"I don't believe that Crab man will show up at the light," Ruth said to Tom and Helen. "He's plainly made up his mind that he won't meet Nita's friends personally. And to think of his getting five hundred dollars so easy!" and she sighed.

For the reward Mr. Hicks had offered for news of his niece, which would lead to her apprehension and return to his guardianship, would have entirely removed from Ruth Fielding's mind her anxiety about Briarwood. Let the Tintacker Mine, in which Uncle Jabez had invested, remain a deep and abiding mystery, if Ruth could earn that five hundred dollars.

But if Jack Crab had placed Nita in good hands and was merely awaiting an opportunity to ex-

change her for the reward which the runaway's uncle had offered, then Ruth need not hope for any portion of the money. And certainly, Crab would make nothing by hiding the girl away and refusing to give her up to Mr. Hicks.

"And if I took money for telling Mr. Hicks where Nita was, why—why it would be almost like taking blood money! Nita liked me, I believe; I think she ought to be with her uncle, and I am sure he is a nice man. But it would be playing the traitor to report her to Mr. Hicks—and that's a fact!" concluded Ruth, taking herself to task. "I could not think of earning money in such a contemptible way."

Whether her conclusion was right, or not, it seemed right to Ruth, and she put the thought of the reward out of her mind from that instant. The ranchman had taken a liking to Ruth and when he climbed into the buckboard he beckoned the girl from the Red Mill to a seat beside him. He drove the ponies, but seemed to give those spirited little animals very little attention. Ruth knew that he must be used to handling horses beside which the ponies seemed like tame rabbits.

"Now what do you think of my Jane Ann?" was the cattleman's question. "Ain't she pretty cute?"

"I am not quite sure that I know what you mean by that, Mr. Hicks," Ruth answered, de-

murely. "But she isn't as smart as she ought to be, or she wouldn't have gone off with Jack Crab."

"Huh!" grunted the other. "Mebbe you're right on that p'int. He didn't have no drop on her—that's so! But ye can't tell what sort of a yarn he give her."

"She would better have had nothing to say to him," said Ruth, emphatically. "She should have confided in Miss Kate. Miss Kate and Jennie were treating her just as nicely as though she were an invited guest. Nita—or Jane, as you call her—may be smart, but she isn't grateful in the least."

"Oh, come now, Miss——"

"No. She isn't grateful," repeated Ruth. "She never even suggested going over to the life saving station and thanking Cap'n Abinadab and his men for bringing her ashore from the wreck of the *Whipstitch*."

"Great cats! I been thinkin' of that," sighed the Westerner. "I want to see them and tell 'em what I think of 'em. I 'spect Jane Ann never thought of such a thing."

"But I liked her, just the same," Ruth went on, slowly. "She was bold, and brave, and I guess she wouldn't ever do a really mean thing."

"I reckon not, Miss!" agreed Mr. Hicks. "My Jane Ann is plumb square, she is. I can

forgive her for running away from us. Mebbe thar was reason for her gittin' sick of Silver Ranch. I—I stand ready to give her 'bout ev'rything she wants—in reason—when I git her back thar."

"Including a piano?" asked Ruth, curiously.

"Great cats! that's what we had our last spat about," groaned Bill Hicks. "Jib, he's had advantages, he has. Went to this here Carlisle Injun school ye hear so much talk about. It purty nigh ruined him, but he *can* break hosses. And thar he l'arned to play one o' them pianners. We was all in to Bullhide one time—we'd been shipping steers—and we piled into the Songbird Dancehall—had the place all to ourselves, for it was daytime—and Jib sot down and fingered them keys somethin' scand'lous. Bashful Ike—he's my foreman—says he never believed before that a sure 'nough man like Jibbeway Pottoway could ever be so ladylike!

"Wal! My Jane Ann was jest enchanted by that thar pianner—yes, Miss! She was jest enchanted. And she didn't give me no peace from then on. Said she wanted one o' the critters at the ranch so Jib could give her lessons. And I jest thought it was foolishness—and it cost money—oh, well! I see now I was a pretty mean old hunks——"

"That's what I heard her call you once,"

chuckled Ruth. "At least, I know now that she was speaking of you, sir."

"She hit me off right," sighed Mr. Hicks. "I hadn't never been used to spending money. But, laws, child! I got enough. I been some waked up since I come East. Folks spend money here, that's a fact."

They found Mother Purling's door opened at the foot of the lighthouse shaft, and the flutter of an apron on the balcony told them that the old lady had climbed to the lantern.

"She doesn't often do that," said Heavy. "Crab does all the cleaning and polishing up there."

"He's left her without any help, then," Ruth suggested. "That's what it means."

And truly, that is what it did mean, as they found out when Ruth, the Cameron twins, and the Westerner climbed the spiral staircase to the gallery outside the lantern.

"Yes; that Crab ain't been here this morning," Mother Purling admitted when Ruth explained that there was reason for Mr. Hicks wishing to see him. "He told me he was mebbe going off for a few days. 'Then you send me a substitute, Jack Crab,' I told him; but he only laughed and said he wasn't going to send a feller here to work into his job. He *is* handy, I allow. But I'm too old to be left all stark alone at this light. I'm going

to have another man when Jack's month is out, just as sure as eggs is eggs!"

Mr. Hicks was just as polite to the old lady as he had been to Miss Kate; and he quickly explained his visit to the lighthouse, and showed her the two letters that Crabb had written.

"Well, ain't that the beatenest?" she cried. "Jack Crab is just as mean as they make 'em, I always did allow. But this is the capsheaf of all his didoes. And you say he run off with the little girl the other night in Mr. Stone's catboat? I dunno where he could have taken her. And that day he'd been traipsing off fishing with you folks on the motor launch; hadn't he? He's been leavin' me to do his work too much. This settles it. Me and Jack Crab parts company at the end of this month!"

"But what is Mr. Hicks to do about his niece, Mother Purling?" cried Ruth. "Will he pay the five hundred dollars to you——?"

"I just guess he won't!" cried the old lady, vigorously. "I ain't goin' to be collector for Crab in none of his risky dealin's—no, ma'am!"

"Then he says he won't give Nita up," exclaimed Tom.

"Can't help it. I'm a government employe. I can't afford to be mixed up in no such didoes."

"Now, I say, Missus!" exclaimed the cattleman, "this is shore too bad! Ye might know

somethin' about whar I kin find this yere reptile by the name of Crab—though I reckon a crab is a inseck, not a reptile," and the ranchman grinned ruefully.

The young folks could scarcely control their laughter at this, and the idea that a crustacean might be an insect was never forgotten by the Cameron twins and Ruth Fielding.

"I dunno where he is," said Mother Purling, shortly. "I can't keep track of the shiftless critter. Ha'f the time when he oughter be here he's out fishing in the dory, yonder—or over to Thimble Island."

"Which is Thimble Island?" asked Tom, quickly.

"Just yon," said the lighthouse keeper, pointing to a cone-shaped rock—perhaps an imaginative person would call it thimble-shaped—lying not far off shore. The lumber schooner had gone on the reef not far from it.

"Ain't no likelihood of his being over thar now, Missus?" asked Mr. Hicks, quickly.

"An' ye could purty nigh throw a stone to it!" scoffed the old woman. "Not likely. B'sides, I dunno as there's a landin' on the island 'ceptin' at low tide. I reckon if he's hidin', Jack Crab is farther away than the Thimble. But I don't know nothin' about him. And I can't accept no money for him—that's all there is to that."

And really, that did seem to be all there was to it. Even such a go-ahead sort of a person as Mr. Hicks seemed balked by the lighthouse keeper's attitude. There seemed nothing further to do here.

Ruth was rather interested in what Mother Purling had said about Thimble Island, and she lingered to look at the conical rock, with the sea foaming about it, when the others started down the stairway. Tom came back for her.

"What are you dreaming about, Ruthie?" he demanded, nudging her.

"I was wondering, Tommy," she said, "just why Jack Crab went so often to the Thimble, as she says he does. I'd like to see that island nearer to; wouldn't you?"

"We'll borrow the catboat and sail out to it. I can handle the *Jennie S.* I bet Helen would like to go," said Tom, at once.

"Oh, I don't suppose that Crab man is there. It's just a barren rock," said Ruth. "But I *would* like to see the Thimble."

"And you shall," promised Tom.

But neither of them suspected to what strange result that promise tended.

CHAPTER XXIII

MAROONED

It was after luncheon before the three friends got away from the Stone bungalow in the catboat. Tom owned a catrigged boat himself on the Lumano river, and Helen and Ruth, of course, were not afraid to trust themselves to his management of the *Jennie S.*

The party was pretty well broken up that day, anyway. Mercy and Miss Kate remained at home and the others found amusement in different directions. Nobody asked to go in the *Jennie S.*, for which Ruth was rather glad.

Mr. Hicks had gone over to Sokennet with the avowed intention of interviewing every soul in the town for news of Jack Crab. Somebody, surely, must know where the assistant lighthouse keeper was, and the Westerner was not a man to be put off by any ordinary evasion.

"My Jane Ann may be hiding over thar amongst them fishermen," he declared to Ruth before he went away. "He couldn't have sailed far with her that night, if he was back in 'twixt two and three hours. No, sir-ree!"

And that was the thought in Ruth's mind. Unless Crab had sailed out and put Nita aboard a New York, or Boston, bound steamer, it seemed impossible that the girl could have gotten very far from Lighthouse Point.

"Shall we take one of the rowboats in tow, Ruth?" queried Tom, before they left the Stone dock.

"No, no!" returned the girl of the Red Mill, hastily. "We couldn't land on that island, anyway."

"Only at low tide," rejoined Tom. "But it will be about low when we get outside the point."

"You don't really suspect that Crab and Nita are out there, Ruth?" whispered Helen, in her chum's ear.

"It's a crazy idea; isn't it?" laughed Ruth. Yet she was serious again in a moment. "I thought, when Mother Purling spoke of his going there so much, that maybe he had a reason—a particular reason."

"Phineas told me that Jack Crab was the best pilot on this coast," remarked Tom. "He knows every channel, and shoal, and reef from Westhampton to Cape o' Winds. If there was a landing at Thimble Island, and any secret place upon it, Jack Crab would be likely to know of it."

"Can you sail us around the Thimble?" asked Ruth. "That's all we want."

"I asked Phin before we started. The sea is clear for half a mile and more all around the Thimble. We can circle it, all right, if the wind holds this way."

"That's all I expect you to do, Tommy," responded Ruth, quickly.

But they all three eyed the conical-shaped rock very sharply as the *Jennie S.* drew nearer. They ran between the lighthouse and the Thimble. The tide, in falling, left the green and slime-covered ledges bare.

"A boat could get into bad quarters there, and easily enough," said Tom, as they ran past.

But when he tacked and the catboat swung her head seaward, they began to observe the far side of the Thimble. It was almost circular, and probably all of a thousand yards in circumference. The waves now ran up the exposed ledges, hissing and gurgling among the cavities, and sometimes throwing up spume-like geysers between the boulders.

"A bad rock for any vessel to stub her toe against trying to make Sokennet Harbor," quoth Tom Cameron. "They say that the wreckers used to have a false beacon here in the old times. They used to bring a sheep out here and tie a lantern to its neck. Then, at low tide, they'd drive the poor sheep over the rocks and the bobbing up and down of the lantern would look

like a riding light on some boat at anchor. Then the lost vessel would dare run in for an anchorage, too, and she'd be wrecked. Jack Crab's grandfather was hanged for it. So Phineas told me."

"How awful!" gasped Helen.

But Ruth suddenly seized her hand, exclaiming: "See there! what is it fluttering on the rock? Look, Tom!"

At the moment the boy could not do so, as he had his hands full with the tiller and sheet, and his eyes were engaged as well. When he turned to look again at the Thimble, what had startled Ruth had disappeared.

"There was something white fluttering against the rock. It was down there, either below high-water mark, or just above. I can't imagine what it was."

"A seabird, perhaps," suggested Helen.

"Then where did it go to so suddenly? I did not see it fly away," Ruth returned.

The catboat sailed slowly past the seaward side of the Thimble. There were fifty places in which a person might hide upon the rock—plenty of broken boulders and cracks in the base of the conical eminence that formed the peculiarly shaped island.

The three watched the rugged shore very sharply as the catboat beat up the wind—the

girls especially giving the Thimble their attention. A hundred pair of eyes might have watched them from the island, as far as they knew. But certainly neither Ruth nor Helen saw anything to feed their suspicion.

"What shall we do now?" demanded Tom. "Where do you girls want to go?"

"I don't care," Helen said.

"Seen all you want to of that deserted island, Ruthie?"

"Do you mind running back again, Tom?" Ruth asked. "I haven't any reason for asking it—no good reason, I mean."

"Pshaw! if we waited for a reason for everything we did, some things would never be done," returned Tom, philosophically.

"There isn't a thing there," declared Helen. "But I don't care in the least where you sail us, Tom."

"Only not to Davy Jones' Locker, Tommy," laughed Ruth.

"I'll run out a way, and then come back with the wind and cross in front of the island again," said Tom, and he performed this feat in a very seamanlike manner.

"I declare! there's a landing we didn't see sailing from the other direction," cried Helen. "See it—between those two ledges?"

"A regular dock; but you couldn't land there

at high tide, or when there was any sea on," returned her brother.

"That's the place!" exclaimed Ruth. "See that white thing fluttering again? That's no seagull."

"Ruth is right," gasped Helen. "Oh, Tom! there's something fluttering there—a handkerchief, is it?"

"Sing out! as loud as ever you can!" commanded the boy, eagerly. "Hail the rock."

They all three raised their voices. There was no answer. But Tom was pointing the boat's nose directly for the opening between the sharp ledges.

"If there is nobody on the Thimble now, there *has* been somebody there recently," he declared. "I'm going to drop the sail and run in there. Stand by with the oars to fend off, girls. We don't want to scratch the catboat more than we can help."

His sister and Ruth sprang to obey him. Each with an oar stood at either rail and the big sail came down on the run. But the *Jennie S.* had headway sufficient to bring her straight into the opening between the ledges.

Tom ran forward, seized the rope in the bow, and leaped ashore, carrying the coil of the painter with him. Helen and Ruth succeeded in stopping the boat's headway with the oars, and the craft

lay gently rocking in the natural dock, without having scraped her paint an atom.

"A fine landing!" exclaimed Tom, taking a turn or two with the rope about a knob of rock.

"Yes, indeed," returned Ruth. She gave a look around. "My, what a lonely spot!"

"It is lonely," the youth answered. "Kind of a Robinson Crusoe place," and he gave a short laugh.

"Listen!" cried Ruth, and held up her hand as a warning.

"What did you hear, Ruth?"

"I thought I heard somebody talking, or calling."

"You did?" Tom listened intently. "I don't hear anything." He listened again. "Yes, I do! Where did it come from?"

"I think it came from yonder," and the girl from the Red Mill pointed to a big, round rock ahead of them.

"Maybe it did, Ruth. We'll—yes, you are right!" exclaimed the boy.

As he spoke there was a scraping sound ahead of them and suddenly a tousled black head popped up over the top of the boulder from which fluttered the bit of white linen that had first attracted Ruth's attention.

"Gracious goodness!" gasped Helen.

"It's Nita!" cried Ruth.

"Oh, oh!" shrilled the lost girl, flying out of concealment and meeting Ruth as she leaped ashore. "Is it really you? Have you come for me? I—I thought I'd have to stay here alone forever. I'd given up all hope of any boat seeing me, or my signal. I—I'm 'most dead of fear, Ruth Fielding! Do, do take me back to land with you."

The Western girl was clearly panic-stricken. The boldness and independence she had formerly exhibited were entirely gone. Being marooned on this barren islet had pretty well sapped the courage of Miss Jane Ann Hicks.

CHAPTER XXIV

PLUCKY MOTHER PURLING

TOM CAMERON audibly chuckled; but he made believe to be busy with the painter of the catboat and so did not look at the Western girl. The harum-scarum, independent, "rough and ready" runaway was actually on the verge of tears. But —really—it was not surprising.

"How long have you been out here on this rock?" demanded Helen, in horror.

"Ever since I left the bungalow."

"Why didn't you wave your signal from the top of the rock, so that it could be seen on the point?" asked Ruth, wonderingly.

"There's no way to get to the top of the rock—or around to the other side of it, either," declared the runaway. "Look at these clothes! they are nearly torn off. And see my hands!"

"Oh, you poor, poor thing!" exclaimed Helen, seeing how the castaway's hands were torn.

"I tried it. I've shouted myself hoarse. No boat paid any attention to me. They were all too far away, I suppose."

"And did that awful man, Crab, bring you here?" cried Ruth.

"Yes. It was dark when he landed and showed me this cave in the rock. There was food and water. Why, I've got plenty to eat and drink even now. But nobody has been here——"

"Didn't he come back?" queried Tom, at last taking part in the conversation.

"He rowed out here once. I told him I'd sink his boat with a rock if he tried to land. I was afraid of him," declared the girl.

"But why did you come here with him that night?" demanded Ruth.

"'Cause I was foolish. I didn't know he was so bad then. I thought he'd really help me. He told me Jennie's aunt had written to my uncle——"

"Old Bill Hicks," remarked Tom, chuckling.

"Yes. I'm Jane Hicks. I'm not Nita," said the girl, gulping down something like a sob.

"We read all about you in the paper," said Helen, soothingly. "Don't you mind."

"And your uncle's come, and he's just as anxious to see you as he can be," declared Ruth.

"So they *did* send for him?" cried Jane Ann.

"No. Crab wrote a letter to Silver Ranch himself. He got you out here so as to be sure to collect five hundred dollars from your uncle

before he gave you up," grunted Tom. "Nice mess of things you made by running off from us."

"Oh, I'll go back with Uncle Bill—I will, indeed," said the girl. "I've been so lonely and scared out here. Seems to me every time the tide rose, I'd be drowned in that cave. The sea's horrid, I think! I never want to see it again."

"Well," Tom observed, "I guess you won't have to worry about Crab any more. Get aboard the catboat. We'll slip ashore mighty easy now, and let him whistle for you—or the money. Mr. Hicks won't have to pay for getting you back."

"I expect he's awful mad at me," sighed Jane Ann, *alias* Nita.

"I know that he is awfully anxious to get you back again, my dear," said Ruth. "He is altogether too good a man for you to run away from."

"Don't you suppose I know that, Miss?" snapped the girl from the ranch.

They embarked in the catboat and Tom showed his seamanship to good advantage when he got the *Jennie S.* out of that dock without rubbing her paint. But the wind was very light and they had to run down with it past the island and then beat up between the Thimble and the lighthouse, toward the entrance to Sokennet Harbor.

Indeed, the breeze fell so at times that the

catboat made no headway. In one of these calms Helen sighted a rowboat some distance away, but pulling toward them from among the little chain of islands beyond the reef on which the lumber schooner had been wrecked.

"Here's a fisherman coming," she said. "Do you suppose he'd take us ashore in his boat, Tom? We could walk home from the light. It's growing late and Miss Kate will be worried."

"Why, Sis, I can scull this old tub to the landing below the lighthouse yonder. We don't need to borrow a boat. Then Phineas can come around in the *Miraflame* to-morrow morning and tow the catboat home."

But Jane Ann had leaped up at once to eye the coming rowboat—and not with favor.

"That looks like the boat that Crab came out to the Thimble in," she exclaimed. "Why! it *is* him."

"Jack Crab!" exclaimed Helen, in terror. "He's after you, then."

"Well, he won't get her," declared Tom, boldly.

"What can we do against that man?" demanded Ruth, anxiously. "I'm afraid of him myself. Let's try to get ashore."

"And before he catches us," begged Helen. "Do, Tom!"

There was no hope of the wind helping them,

and the man in the rowboat was pulling strongly for the becalmed *Jennie S.* Tom instantly dropped her sail and seized one of the oars. He could scull pretty well, and he forced the heavy boat through the quiet sea directly for the light-house landing.

The three girls were really much disturbed; Crab pulled his lighter boat much faster than Tom could drive the *Jennie S.* and it was a question if he would not overtake her before she reached the landing.

"He sees me," said Jane Hicks, excitedly. "He'll get hold of me if he can. And maybe he'll hurt you folks."

"He's got to catch us first," grunted Tom, straining at the oar.

"We're going to beat him, Tommy!" cried Helen, encouragingly. "Don't give up!"

Once Crab looked around and bawled some threat to them over his shoulder. But they did not reply. His voice inspired Tom with renewed strength—or seemed to. The boy strained at his single oar, and the *Jennie S.* moved landward at a good, stiff pace.

"Stand ready with the painter, Ruth!" called Tom, at last. "We must fasten the boat before we run."

"And where will we run to?" demanded Helen.

"To the light, of course," returned her chum.

"Give *me* the hitch-rein!" cried Jane Ann Hicks, snatching the coil of line from Ruth's hand, and the next moment she leaped from the deck of the catboat to the wharf.

The distance was seven or eight feet, but she cleared it and landed on the stringpiece. She threw the line around one of the piles and made a knot with a dexterity that would have surprised her companions at another time.

But there was no opportunity then for Tom, Helen and Ruth to stop to notice it. All three got ashore the moment the catboat bumped, and they left her where she was and followed the flying Western girl up the wharf and over the stretches of sand towards the lightkeeper's cottage.

Before their feet were off the planks of the wharf Jack Crab's boat collided with the *Jennie S.* and the man scrambled upon her deck, and across it to the wharf. He left his own dory to go ashore if it would, and set out to catch the girl who—he considered—was worth five hundred dollars to him.

But Jane Ann and her friends whisked into the little white house at the foot of the light shaft, and slammed the door before Crab reached it.

"For the Land of Goshen!" cried the old

lady, who was sitting knitting in her tiny sitting-room. "What's the meaning of this?"

"It's Crab! It's Jack Crab!" cried Helen, almost in hysterics. "He's after us!"

Tom had bolted the door. Now Crab thundered upon it, with both feet and fists.

"Let me in!" he roared from outside. "Mother Purling! you let me git that gal!"

"What does this mean?" repeated the lighthouse keeper, sternly. "Ain't this the gal that big man was after this morning?" she demanded, pointing at Jane Ann.

"Yes, Mrs. Purling—it is Jane Hicks. And this dreadful Crab man has kept her out on the Thimble all this time—alone!" cried Ruth. "Think of it! Now he has chased us in here——"

"I'll fix that Jack Crab," declared the plucky old woman, advancing toward the door. "Hi, you, Jack! go away from there."

"You open this door, Mother Purling, if you knows what's best for you," commanded the sailor.

"You better git away from that door, if you knows what's best for *you,* Jack Crab!" retorted the old woman. "I don't fear ye."

"I see that man here this morning. Did he leave aught for me?" cried Crab, after a moment. "If he left the five hundred dollars he

promised to give for the gal, he can have her. Give me the money, and I'll go my ways."

"I ain't no go-between for a scoundrel such as you, Jack Crab," declared the lighthouse-keeper. "There's no money here for ye."

"Then I'll have the gal if I tear the lighthouse down for it—stone by stone!" roared the fellow.

"And it's your kind that always blows before they breeches," declared Mother Purling, referring to the habit of the whale, which spouts before it upends and dives out of sight. "Go away!"

"I won't go away!"

"Yes, ye will, an' quick, too!"

"Old woman, ye don't know me!" stormed the unreasonable man. "I want that money, an' I'm bound to have it—one way or th' other!"

"You'll get nuthin', Jack Crab, but a broken head if ye keep on in this fashion," returned the woman of the lighthouse, her honest wrath growing greater every moment.

"We'll see about that!" howled the man. "Are ye goin' to let me in or not?"

"No, I tell ye! Go away!"

"Then I'll bust my way in, see ef I don't!"

At that the fellow threw himself against the door, and the screws of one hinge began to tear out of the woodwork. Mother Purling saw it, and motioned the frightened girls and Tom to-

ward the stairway which led to the gallery around the lantern.

"Go up yon!" she commanded. "Shut and lock that door on ye. He'll not durst set foot on government property, and that's what the light is. Go up."

She shooed them all into the stairway and slammed the door. There she stood with her back against it, while, at the next blow, Jack Crab forced the outer door of her cottage inward and fell sprawling across its wreck into the room.

CHAPTER XXV

WHAT JANE ANN WANTED

RUTH and her companions could not see what went on in the cottage; but they did not mount the stairs. They could not leave the old woman—plucky as she was—to fight Jack Crab alone.

But they need not have been so fearful for Mother Purling's safety. The instant the man fell into the main room of the cottage, Mother Purling darted to the stove, seized the heavy poker which lay upon the hearth, and sprang for the rascal.

Jack Crab had got upon his knees, threatening her with dire vengeance. The old lighthouse keeper never said a word in reply, but brought the heavy poker down upon his head and shoulders with right good will, and Jack Crab's tune changed on the instant.

Again and again Mother Purling struck him. He rolled upon the floor, trying to extricate himself from the wreck of her door, and so escape.

But before he could do this, and before the old woman had ceased her attack, there was a shout outside, a horse was brought to an abrupt

halt at the gate, and a huge figure in black flung itself from the saddle, and came running through the gate and up to the cottage.

"What you got there, Missus?" roared the deep voice of Bill Hicks, of Bullhide, and at the sound of his voice Jane Ann burst open the door at the foot of the stairs and ran out to meet him.

"This here's the man you want to meet, I guess," panted the old woman, desisting at length in her use of the poker. "Do ye want him now, Mister?"

"Uncle Bill!" shrieked Jane Ann.

"Great cats!" cried the cattleman. "Is it Jane Ann herself? Is she alive?"

The girl flung herself into the big man's arms. "I'm all right, Uncle!" she cried, laughing and crying together. "And that man yonder didn't hurt me—only kep' me on a desert island till Ruth and Tom and Helen found me."

"Then he kin go!" declared Bill Hicks, turning suddenly as Crab started through the door. "And here's what will help him!"

The Westerner swung his heavy boot with the best intention in the world and caught Jack Crab just as he was going down the step. With a yell of pain the fellow sailed through the air, landing at least ten feet from the doorway. But he was up from his hands and knees and running

hard in an instant, and he ran so hard, and to such good purpose, that he ran right out of this story then and there. Ruth Fielding and her friends never saw the treacherous fellow again.

"But if he'd acted like he oughter," said Mr. Hicks, "and hadn't put my Jane Ann out on that thar lonesome rock, and treated her the way he done, I should have considered myself in his debt. I'd have paid him the five hundred dollars, sure enough. I'd have paid it over willingly if he'd left my gal with these nice people and only told me whar she was. But I wouldn't give him a cent now—not even if he was starvin'. For if I found him in that condition I'd see he got food and not money," and the big man chuckled.

"So you haven't got to pay five hundred dollars for me, then, Uncle Bill?" said his niece, as they sat on the porch of the Stones' bungalow, talking things over.

"No, I haven't. No fault of yours, though, you little rascal. I dunno but I ought to divide it 'twixt them three friends of yourn that found ye."

"Not for us!" cried Tom and Helen.

"Nor for me," said Ruth, earnestly. "It would not be right. I never should respect myself again if I thought I had tried to find Nita for money."

"But if it hadn't been for Ruth we'd never

have sailed over there to the Thimble," declared Tom.

The Western girl had been thinking seriously; now she seized her uncle by the arm. "I tell you what I want, Uncle Bill!" she cried.

"Something beside the pianner and the shift-on hat?" he grumbled, but his blue eyes twinkled.

"Those things don't count," she declared earnestly. "But this five hundred dollars, Uncle Bill, you haven't got to pay that Crab man. So you just spend it by taking all these girls and boys that have been so nice to me out to Silver Ranch. They think it must be the finest place that ever happened—and I don't know but 'tis, Uncle, if you don't have too much of it," she added.

"Great cats! that would shore be some doin's; wouldn't it?" exclaimed the cattleman, grinning broadly.

"You bet it would! We'll take Ruth and Helen and Tom and Heavy an—why, every last one of 'em that'll go. We'll show 'em a right good time; is it a go, Uncle Bill?"

And it certainly was "a go," for we shall meet Ruth and her friends next in a volume entitled, "Ruth Fielding at Silver Ranch; Or, Schoolgirls Among the Cowboys."

Old Bill Hicks' hearty invitation could not be accepted, however, until the various young folks had written home to their parents and guardians

about it. And the expectation of what fun they could have on Silver Ranch did not spoil the fun to be found closer at hand, at Lighthouse Point.

The remainder of that fortnight at the bungalow would long be remembered by Ruth and her girl friends, especially. Mr. Hicks got board at Sokennet; but Jane Ann (although they all called her "Nita" save The Fox, who took some delight in teasing her about her ugly name) remained at the bungalow. The cattleman could not do too much for anybody who had been kind to his niece, and had the life saving men not refused absolutely to accept anything from him, he would have made them all a present because they had rescued Jane Ann from the wreck of the *Whipstitch.*

Nevertheless, Mr. Hicks found out something that he *could* do for the life-savers, and he presented the station with a fine library—something which all the surfmen, and Cap'n Abinadab as well, could enjoy during the long winter days and evenings. Nor did the ranchman forget Mother Purling at the lighthouse. Up from New York came the finest black silk dress and bonnet that the big man could buy for money in any shop, and no present could have so delighted the plucky old lighthouse keeper. She had longed, she said, for a black silk dress all her life.

Before the young folks departed from Lighthouse Point, too, Miss Kate invited the life savers, and Mother Purling, and Phineas and some of the other longshoremen and their wives to a "party" at the bungalow. And there were good things to eat (Heavy saw to *that,* of course) and a moving-picture entertainment brought down from the city for that evening, and a big display of fireworks afterward on the shore.

This wound up Ruth Fielding's visit to Lighthouse Point. The fortnight of fun was ended all too soon. She and Helen and Tom, and the rest of the visitors, started for home, all promising, if their parents and guardians agreed, to meet Jane Ann Hicks and her uncle a week later, in Syracuse, ready for the long and delightful journey across the continent to Bullhide, Montana.

"Well, we certainly did have some great times," was Tom's comment, after the last goodbyes had been spoken and the young folks were homeward bound.

"Oh, it was lovely," answered his twin sister. "And think of how we helped Nita—I mean Jane Ann."

"Most of the credit for that goes to Ruth," said Tom.

"Oh, no!" cried the girl from the Red Mill. "Yes, we certainly had a grand time," she added.

"I love the bounding sea, and the shifting sands, and the lighthouse, and all!"

"Oh, I do hope we can go out to that ranch!" sighed Helen. "I have always wanted to visit such a place, to see the cattle and the cowboys, and the boundless prairies."

"And I want to ride a broncho," put in her brother. "They say some of 'em can go like the wind. Ruth, you'll have to ride, too."

"Take your last look at the sea!" came from Heavy. "Maybe we won't get another look at it for a long time."

All turned to look at the rolling waves, glistening brightly in the Summer sun.

"Isn't it lovely!"

"Good-bye, Old Ocean, good-bye!" sang out Helen.

Ruth threw a kiss to the waves.

Then the ocean faded from their sight. And here we will leave Ruth Fielding and say good-bye.

THE END

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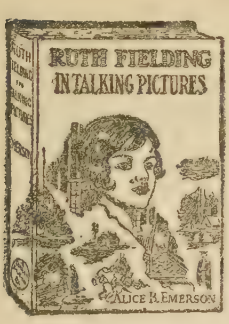

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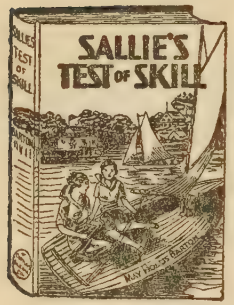

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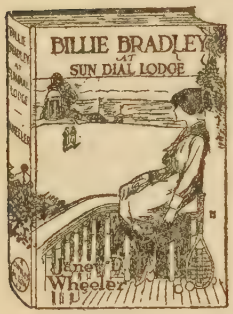

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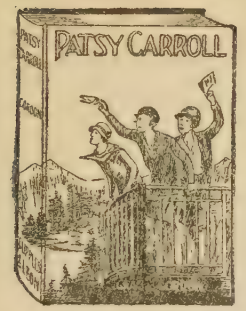

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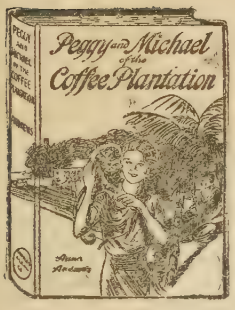

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